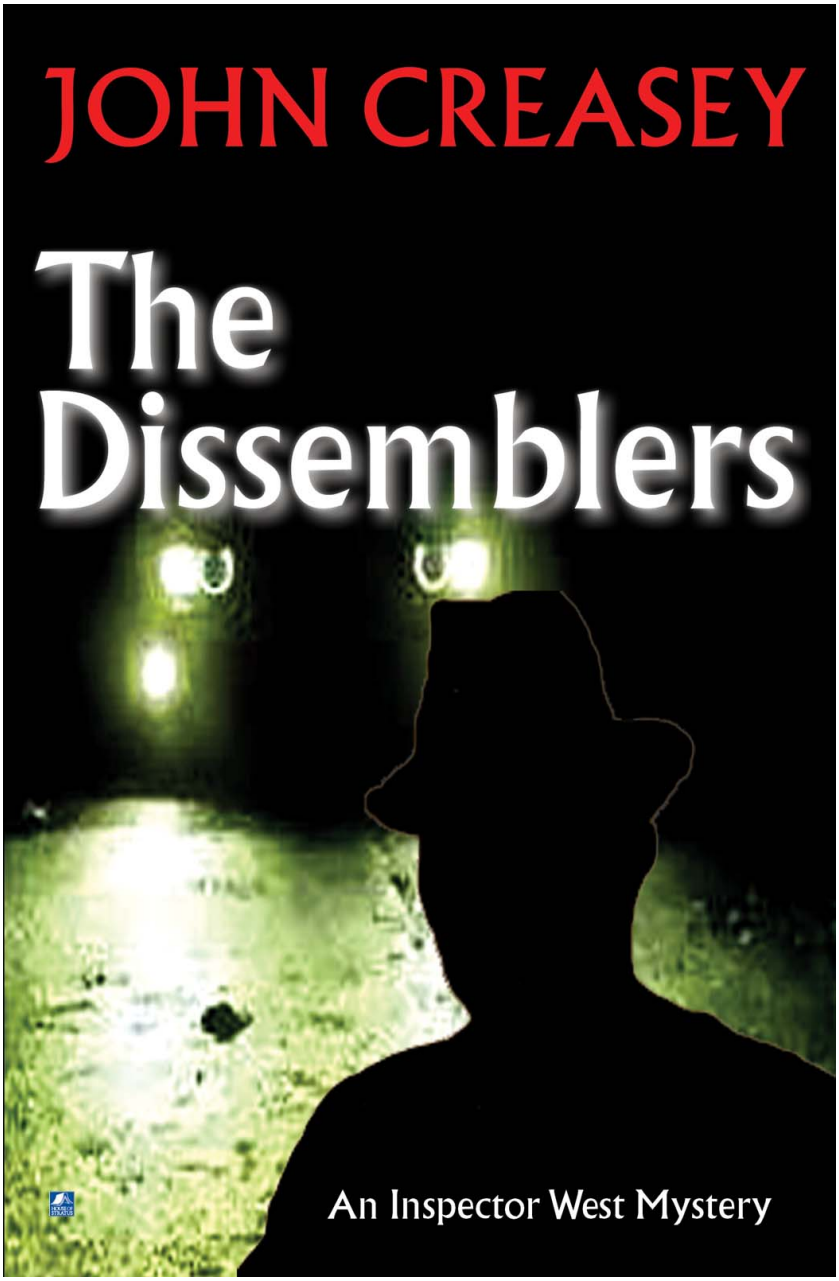
JOHN CREASEY

The Dissemblers



An Inspector West Mystery

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The Dissemblers

(Puzzle For Inspector West)

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About the Author

John Creasey – Master Storyteller - was born in Surrey, England in 1908 into a poor family in which there were nine children, John Creasey grew up to be a true master story teller and international sensation. His more than 600 crime, mystery and thriller titles have now sold 80 million copies in 25 languages. These include many popular series such as *Gideon of Scotland Yard, The Toff, Dr Palfrey and The Baron*.

Creasy wrote under many pseudonyms, explaining that booksellers had complained he totally dominated the 'C' section in stores. They included:

> *Gordon Ashe, M E Cooke, Norman Deane, Robert Caine Frazer, Patrick Gill, Michael Halliday, Charles Hogarth, Brian Hope, Colin Hughes, Kyle Hunt, Abel Mann, Peter Manton, J J Marric, Richard Martin, Rodney Mattheson, Anthony Morton and Jeremy York.*

Never one to sit still, Creasey had a strong social conscience, and stood for Parliament several times, along with founding the *One Party Alliance* which promoted the idea of government by a coalition of the best minds from across the political spectrum.

He also founded the *British Crime Writers' Association*, which to this day celebrates outstanding crime writing. *The Mystery Writers of America* bestowed upon him the *Edgar Award* for best novel and then in 1969 the ultimate *Grand Master Award*. John Creasey's stories are as compelling today as ever.

1

ARREST

Chief inspector Roger West, of New Scotland Yard, stepped into the large room, and Detective Sergeant Peel followed him. They left the door open, and Detective Officer Burnaby placed his big frame half in and half out of the room.

A pale-faced man looked up from his desk, which was slantwise across one corner. Behind his grey head, wine-red curtains hung in deep folds. It was a lovely room, quiet – but not peaceful, then.

A middle-aged woman, still beautiful, sat in a winged armchair in front of the blazing log fire; and shivered. Her eyes were huge, there were dark patches beneath them, and her cheeks were chalk white. Lipstick slashed the pallor, scarlet varnish tipped the nails of long, white hands.

Roger West stepped to the desk.

The woman cried: "No!" in a strangled voice.

"You are James Mortimer Liddel?" West said.

The man's voice was deep and firm.

"Yes."

"It is my duty to charge you with the murder of Lancelot Hay," West said, "and I must warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence." He moved round the desk and rested his hand lightly on the older man's shoulder. "I have to ask you to come with me, Mr Liddel."

Liddel made no move.

"It isn't true," gasped the woman; "it isn't true!" She sprang to her feet. "I tell you it isn't true; you're crazy to arrest him! You must be mad!" She took two quick steps towards West, and Peel moved nearer her. Her eyes blazed, but she could hardly get the words out. "You mustn't take him away!"

"I'm sorry, Mrs Liddel." West sounded as if he meant that, it wasn't just a formality.

"I won't let you take him!"

"Don't, Mary," Liddel said. "The Inspector is only doing his job. You're making it worse for all of us."

"How can you be so calm? Anyone would think it didn't matter, but they're going to try you for *murder*. They might hang you! You might be going off to your death, and you sit there as if you were going—" The woman broke off, with a stifled cry.

"I didn't kill Lancelot, and so they cannot prove that I did," Liddel said. "Mary, will you go? I want a word with the Inspector before we leave."

"They mustn't take you!" Mary Liddel cried.

"Francesca will be here tonight," Liddel said; "she will help you, my dear. Please don't make it worse."

His wife caught her breath, turned as if she were going, then swung

round, pushed West aside, and clutched her husband's hands. She flung herself on her knees beside him and buried her face against his coat; sobs wracked her body. The wide, loose sleeves of a dark blue dress billowed, as if in the wind, the skirt spread over the wine-red carpet, a wide circle serrated with narrow pleats. Liddel stared straight in front of him, not at West or at anyone. He looked very tired.

Peel blew his nose.

"Come away, Mrs Liddel," West said, and took her arm.

She didn't resist, but let him help her up; she was still crying. He took her towards the door. Behind the bulky Burnaby, a young, scared girl dressed in a maid's cap and apron, stood uncertainly.

"Look after Mrs Liddel," West said to her.

The maid put out a hand, unsteadily, and led the woman away. Burnaby now stepped inside and closed the door, as if he wanted to shut out the sound of crying.

"We'd better talk at the police station," West told Liddel.

"Yes." Liddel stood up. He was a tall man with broad shoulders, his hair was thick, he was handsome in an impressive way. "I wanted my wife out of the room, Inspector. All I wish to say here is that you have been very kind. No one could have handled a distasteful task with more consideration. You advised me to be alone, but my wife insisted on staying." He paused, looked away from Roger, and then added: "All her life she has been refusing to believe that anything could go wrong. All her life—"

He broke off abruptly.

"We shall help Mrs Liddel in every way we can," West said.

"I'm sure. I'm not worried about that." Liddel's lips curved in a slight, sad smile. "When one gets knowledge of the police only at second hand it is very misleading."

He looked down at three photographs on his desk – of his wife, a young woman and a young man. He picked up his wife's photograph, then put it down. His voice was strained.

"She took that herself – a self-portrait. And the others—"

He broke off abruptly. "Shall we go?"

As they left the room, two more detectives, from the Division which covered Kensington, where the Liddels lived, came up the stairs. West stayed with them to search the lovely room and the rest of the house. Peel and Burnaby went out with Liddel, into the cold March night. The last sound they heard inside the house was that of the woman, crying.

The house was large, and every room showed excellent taste and hinted at wealth. Liddel, besides his pension as a retired senior Civil Servant, had private means. Roger West went in room after room, but had no time to search each thoroughly; it was little more than a formality, for the evidence against Liddel was already strong.

He made notes of places he would search more thoroughly, if necessary.

On the half-landing was a door he hadn't yet opened. He went in, and switched on the light. This was a box room, which had been turned into a

darkroom. Two cameras, slides, films, all the equipment to gladden an expert's heart, were here.

"Go and get one of the servants," he said to the man with him.

The maid who had gone off with Mrs Liddel came along, dwarfed by the Yard man; timid, nervous.

"How's your mistress?" asked Roger.

"She's—she's terribly upset, sir. I've sent for the doctor."

"That's right." So timidity did not conceal a lack of common sense. The girl had intelligent, grey eyes, which were candid and clear. "Who uses this darkroom?"

"Oh, it's Madame's, sir; she's wonderful at photography, she does all her own developing and printing."

"Does anyone else use it?"

"No, sir, not really. Miss Francesca used to, now and then.

Mr Liddel—" She broke off, moistening her lips. "*He* isn't interested, except in the results, sir. He always says he can't take a snap without moving the camera."

Roger smiled.

"I see, thanks. All right, you look after Mrs Liddel."

Two hours later, Roger West walked along the nearly deserted corridors of Scotland Yard. He turned into his own office, which overlooked the Thames Embankment, and switched on the light. It was cold in here. He went to his desk, at one end of the room, and sat down heavily. He lit a cigarette and stared at a Manila folder on the desk. It was marked *Liddel-Hay* and contained all the records of the investigation of the murder of Lancelot Hay, whose body had been exhumed ten days before, and found to contain arsenic. He flipped open the file, and the first document was a note, printed by hand in block capitals, and not signed. It read: LANCELOT HAY WAS MURDERED

There was a rubber-stamped date on it: February 13. That was the day on which it had been received at the Yard. Attached to it was the envelope, made of the same cream-laid paper as that of the note itself. The postmark was London, and didn't help. There were smears of grey powder on both; but on neither had the police found a trace of a fingerprint they could identify. Beneath it were several other identical anonymous letters, beneath those, reports of interviews with the doctor who had signed the death certificate, all the little things which had indicated the possibility of poison. Finally, the police had obtained an exhumation order. Now . . .

A man who was greatly respected by everyone who knew him; who had been a Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office until his recent retirement; a prominent worker in the Church; a man known to be kindly and humane and generous, was waiting to go into the dock, next morning. And a highly-strung, almost neurotic woman was virtually alone in a great house, apparently near despair.

It wasn't only that West felt sorry for them both; there was something he couldn't explain but which made him doubt whether the evidence, which he himself had found, was foolproof. Anyone to whom he confessed that would scoff at him.

He heard footsteps, familiar and heavy. He wasn't surprised when the door was thrust open, and Inspector Eddie Day put his head inside the room. Eddie had a prominent nose, slightly protruding teeth, and a backward slanting forehead; and nature had been mean with his chin. He grinned.

"Up late, Handsome?" Because he often had difficulty with them, he usually emphasised his aspirates.

"I wouldn't call it late," Roger said.

"It's nearly eleven. You know—" Eddie insinuated himself into the room, as if he wasn't sure of a welcome. He didn't close the door. "You seem to smell the right time to be burning the midnight oil, Handsome."

"Do I?"

"Anyone would think you had a private line to Chatty's flat, and know when he's roaming around. He's just come in."

"If the Assistant Commissioner hears you calling him Chatty, you'll get a flea in your ear," said Roger, making a deliberate effort to be amiable. "I didn't know he was on the prowl."

"Some people would believe you," sniffed Eddie. His eyes were also slightly protuberant, and he blinked frequently. "You've got Liddel tied up all right, I see. I 'and—*hand* it to you, Roger, you did a good job on that. Very good job. How did Liddel behave?"

"He didn't throw a fit of hysteria, if that's what you mean."

"Wouldn't expect him to, too much of a gentleman," said Eddie, and sniffed. "Tell you what – you'd better slip out a side way. The news hawks are clustering round tonight. They're not giving the Back Room Inspector any peace at all. Big show, for them, the Liddel case. You know"—Eddie came a little farther into the room—"it wouldn't surprise me if they don't get awkward. Got some powerful friends in Fleet Street, Liddel has."

"Supposing we jump that fence when we get to it?" Roger suggested.

"I'm only warning you," said Eddie. "I—I think he's coming." He paused for a second, his head raised, then winked and went out quickly, closing the door without a sound.

Eddie had ears as sharp as his eyes. He was the Yard's expert on forgery, and on his subject, shrewd and occasionally brilliant. In every other respect, he made Roger marvel that he had ever reached his present rank. But his ears hadn't betrayed him, and another man walked along the passage, with heavy, deliberate footsteps which stopped outside the door.

Roger lit another cigarette.

The door opened, and Sir Guy Chatworth, the Assistant Commissioner, came in, closed it, and stood looking down at Roger, blank-faced. He was a large, portly man, dressed that night in light brown tweeds, which increased his bulk. He had grizzled hair which hung in ringlets to his head, except a patch in the middle, which was bald and brown. His complexion was ruddy

and veiny; there were many who said that he looked a perfect farmer type. His grey-blue eyes had a gimlet quality.

"Good evening, sir," said Roger.

"Evening," grunted Chatworth, and moved to a chair and sat down. "What are you worried about?"

"I like some jobs less than others," Roger said. "Care to smoke, sir?"

"That doesn't answer my question, young Roger." Chatworth helped himself to a cigarette. "I've known you long enough to know when you're not happy. Liddel?"

"The evidence seems cast iron."

"That doesn't answer the question, either."

"Well, sir—"

"Listen," said Chatworth, "it's late, we're alone, you needn't be formal."

Roger smiled. "Thanks! Mrs Liddel was hysterical, and the whole business upset me."

"I don't believe it," said Chatworth. "You've had plenty of unpleasant jobs, and you don't let sentiment get in your way. Think there's any weakness in the case?"

"It stands up to every test I can give it," Roger replied. "Hay was a nasty piece of work, and it's been proved conclusively that he was blackmailing his uncle, who had a love child nearly thirty years ago. We can't find out where the illegitimate son is—we've no trace, and Liddel says he doesn't know. The blackmailing had been going on for five years. Add to that, dislike between the pair of them and several recent quarrels. Add Liddel refused to pay any more hush-money. Add the note we found from the nephew, telling Liddel that unless he paid up at once, documentary proof would be sent to the press—that made action urgent, from Liddel's point of view. Add also that Liddel bought arsenic, several weeks ago, that he met Lancelot Hay in a quiet country pub, and went there using an alias, and also add the fact that death came soon after that dinner. There isn't much weakness about the case, is there? Motive, opportunity of his own making, and the poison that was used. To make it worse, Liddel first denied having met his nephew at the country pub, and put up a false alibi. There's absolutely nothing wrong, as far as I can see."

"And you still don't like it."

Roger said: "I don't see Liddel as a murderer, and that's a laugh in itself. Half the murderers I've helped to hang seemed incapable of committing that or any other crime. You don't have to be a criminal to commit a murder; citizens, exemplary in all other respects, seem to fall for it. I'm uneasy without cause."

"But you're uneasy."

Roger shrugged.

"Any other line you can follow?" asked Chatworth.

"None I can see. I've checked as far as it's humanly possible to check, and we've just no trace of the illegitimate son. Liddel has two children of his marriage. Anthony, aged twenty-seven, is a bit of a libertine, hasn't lived at

home for years, was on amiable but not devoted terms with his family. He's a young rake, adored by the servants. He stood to gain nothing from the murder, has no great affection for his father, and in any case, hasn't seen his cousin Lancelot for two years. On the night of the murder, he says he was in his own flat, and we can't disprove it."

"No doubt about that?"

"None we can find. Then there's the daughter, Francesca." Roger frowned. "She's been in the United States for the past three months, and before that had her own flat—the elder Liddels lived alone. Francesca's on the way home now, she left New York by air, yesterday. There are no other close relatives. Lancelot Hay hadn't any money, so that couldn't be the motive; so, Liddel has the only known motive."

"Well, it all seems to add up," said Chatworth. "The Public Prosecutor had a good go at the evidence before the warrant for the arrest was sworn, and he's quite confident. I should try to get the thing out of your system."

Roger didn't speak.

"Not nursing any idea you don't want to talk about yet, are you?" asked Chatworth, knowingly.

"I haven't a glimmering of any alternative," said Roger, "the only thing that really justifies wondering – if it does – is the spate of anonymous letters. All were carefully cleaned of fingerprints; we haven't a clue as to who sent them. Yet it means that someone else knew where Liddel was on the night of the murder."

"Sure?"

"It's a pretty strong indication, anyhow. It also means that someone else hates Liddel's guts."

"So what you really think is that Liddel might have been framed," Chatworth said abruptly.

"It's the only likely reason for having doubts," Roger said. "But I haven't found indications of anyone who would hate Liddel enough for that, except in the anonymous letters. The love child's a possibility, but we just can't find him. No one in the family and no friends of the family appear to have any reason for wanting Liddel to be hanged." He stood up, with a short laugh. "Anyhow, that's not my job, it's the job of the defence."

"Who's handling it?"

"Potter"

"Couldn't have a better solicitor," Chatworth said. "I wonder who they'll brief for the trial. You go home, Roger, and don't worry."

At half-past twelve, Roger West put his car into the garage by the side of his house at Bell Street, Chelsea, and stood for a few minutes by the front gate. The stars were clear and the cold wind had a knife edge; but he stayed there. The house was in darkness, which meant that Janet, his wife, had gone to bed. This wasn't a case which caused her any anxiety. He glanced up at the window of their bedroom, and smiled a little.

"This won't do!" he said aloud.

He walked smartly to the front door, let himself in with a key, then closed the door quietly. He turned into the room on the right of the small, square hall, and switched on the light. This was a friendly room, comfortably furnished, showing some signs of wear and tear. On the table by his armchair, which backed on to the window, were two drawings, bright with coloured crayons. He picked them up, and his smile became more free. One had 'Scoopy' scrawled across the top in faint but neat block capitals; the other was signed 'Richard', the letters uneven. His two sons were the rival artists. Scoopy, now nearly seven, seemed to show a natural bent for drawing. Richard, nearly six, had more hope than ability.

Roger poured himself out a whisky and soda, and sat down to drink it at his leisure. It wasn't long before he'd forgotten the drawings and was thinking about the Liddel case. He wished it hadn't got under his skin, it might make him moody at home.

He was halfway through the drink when a car turned into the street. He didn't really notice that, until it stopped outside. A car door banged, then someone walked quickly and lightly up the narrow path to the front door. He reached the front door before the bell rang, waited a moment, then opened it.

The light shone on a tall, well-dressed young woman.

"Good evening," said Roger.

"Are you Mr West?"

"Yes."

"I hope you will spare me a few minutes," the girl said. "My name is Liddel—Francesca Liddel."

2

FRANCESCA

Roger stood aside.

"Come in, Miss Liddel."

The light fell fully on to her face. She was attractive, and she seemed calm. Yet she also seemed surprised by his prompt acquiescence. She was dressed in a smooth-textured coat of bottle green, with huge sleeves and a big rolled collar, and she wore a wide-brimmed hat of the same shade. A diamond flashed from her right hand; she carried one glove and wore the other.

He stepped across the hall.

"This room, please." He waited for her to pass, then looked out of the front door. He saw a man at the wheel of the car, smoking a cigarette, but the red glow didn't give sufficient light for him to see the man's face. Roger closed the front door and went into the room.

"Do sit down. Will you have a drink?" He smiled.

She stood by the fireplace, looking at him, frowning, puzzled. She didn't seem to hear the invitation or the question. Roger went across to the small cocktail cabinet, which was already open.

"I can offer you practically anything normal. Whisky, sherry, gin—"

"Thank you, I won't drink." She moved her hands, and the diamond ring on her finger scintillated.

"What's so puzzling about me?" Roger asked.

"You *are* Chief Inspector West, of Scotland Yard, aren't you?

"Yes."

"I thought you'd be different." She wasn't being naïve or ingenuous, she was really puzzled.

"Sure you won't have a drink?" Roger said, smiling. "I must just pop up and have a word with my wife."

"Thank you, no. But please carry on."

He went out, left the door ajar, and hurried upstairs. The door of his bedroom was open. Light from a street lamp shone on to Janet, who slept in the middle of the double bed, with her hair in dark disarray over the pillow. The bedclothes were drawn up to her neck. He sat on the side of the bed and lifted the telephone, dialled 999, and was answered almost at once.

Roger gave his number and asked for Scotland Yard. Almost immediately, a man said: "Information Room at Scotland Yard: can I help you?"

"This is Inspector West. There's a car parked outside my house. I want it watched and all details taken. Make it a special job, and send someone who's been working with me on the Liddel case along—I want to have the driver identified."

"Very good, sir."

Roger replaced the receiver cautiously. Janet didn't stir. He went downstairs slowly, trying to decide whether Francesca Liddel had really been so puzzled by his appearance, or whether it was anything which she hadn't yet told him about. He thought he had a clear picture of her in his mind, but when he opened the door and saw her again, that picture faded. There was vitality about her beauty. She had fine grey eyes, clearly marked eyebrows, striking features; he would have guessed anywhere that she was James Liddel's daughter.

"Well, what can I do for you?" he asked.

She gave an unexpected little laugh.

"I expected to be shown the door!"

"It being improper to visit a policeman in his private home? It isn't usual, but it's been done before, and I'm sure you wouldn't try to bring undue influence to bear. Do sit down."

She sat down in Janet's chair, and he opposite her. She had good legs and ankles, sheathed in nylons. Her flowing movements had grace.

"My father didn't kill Lancelot," she said.

"I can only act on the evidence, Miss Liddel."

"The evidence must be wrong."

Roger said: "Mr Gabriel Potter is one of the best solicitors in London, and I've no doubt he will do everything he can to prove that the police are wrong. The last thing we want is to convict anyone who's innocent. If new evidence were produced before the trial, and it proved that we've been wrong, we shouldn't proceed."

"I think you mean that," said Francesca Liddel, after a pause. "Is it possible to postpone the hearing tomorrow? There is one at the police court, isn't there?"

"At the Magistrate's Court. I'm afraid it isn't possible, without new evidence."

"When must you have that?"

"By eleven o'clock in the morning."

For the first time, she looked away from him.

"I don't think that's possible. There isn't time. Mr West, I just don't care to think what will happen to my mother if that first hearing takes place in the morning. She is prostrate now, and desperately frightened. She keeps talking of killing herself. She is rather—sensitive to public opinion. Suicide is a real possibility."

"A doctor can give her a sedative and see her through," Roger said.

"I doubt it."

Roger said: "Miss Liddel, there are some things I should say to you, and some I shouldn't. This is something I shouldn't. We took no action until the evidence was so strong and unchallengeable that we had no alternative to making the charge. I don't think that new evidence will be forthcoming, certainly not in time for tomorrow morning. There's nothing the police can do to help you now. The responsibility for Mrs Liddel rests on you. I'm sorry."

"What would you think, if she really killed herself?"

"That it was an even greater tragedy than it is," said Roger, slowly.

"I think she'll try."

"As you're forewarned, you ought to be able to make sure that she can't do herself any harm."

Francesca Liddel leaned forward, and said intently: "I don't care to accept all the responsibility for that, Mr West. Oh, please, don't misunderstand me, I'm not suggesting it would be your fault." The quick smile which accompanied the disclaimer made her seem really beautiful. "I've arranged for a nurse to be with her through the night. But—I'd be happier if it were a police nurse."

That was a point.

"I see. But can't you stay with her?" Roger asked.

"We were not on the best of terms when I left England, and my presence makes her even more hysterical," the girl said. "Mr West, I want to try to make sure that there isn't a further tragedy, I'd like to know that an absolutely reliable nurse is on duty with her, night and day. Can't you arrange that?"

Roger took out his cigarettes, and proffered them. She didn't seem to notice what he was doing. He lit a cigarette, without taking his gaze from her. She seemed intent and deadly earnest.

"Can't you arrange it?" she repeated.

"I'd have to have a better reason than you've given me," Roger said. "I'd have to be sure that there is a serious possibility that her life is threatened. Then I could give her protection. That's what you mean, isn't it? You're not worried about suicide."

She said, "I believe her life is in danger, and she's in a desperate frame of mind."

"I see," said Roger.

"Will you do what I ask?"

"Will the morning do?"

"No, no! It must be tonight."

Roger leaned across to the telephone, which was by his side – an extension from the one upstairs. He dialled Whitehall 1212, and was answered promptly. He asked for an Inspector whom he knew would be on night duty, and said: "It's West here. Can you arrange for a nurse to go to Mrs Liddel, at 11 Maybury Crescent, to replace the nurse now on duty there? The nurse is to be on guard against an attack on Mrs Liddel, and may find her in a suicidal mood."

"By Jove, that's hot!" The other man sounded excited. "Found another angle?"

"It could be."

"I'll get someone over there right away."

"Thanks," said Roger. "'Bye."

Putting the receiver back, he dropped the lighted cigarette, and made a fuss picking it up again. Thus, he was able to look at Francesca Liddel

without her knowing that he was doing so. He saw the tears glistening. She took out a handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes, and was still dabbing when he looked at her frankly. She relaxed, sitting right back in the chair. The tension had gone out of her. Roger stood up, went to the cocktail cabinet, and poured out a whisky and soda, and carried it across to her. She gave a twisted smile, and took it.

"Thank you." She sipped. "Thank you very much."

For the first time, he saw how tired she was. It wasn't surprising. Less than forty-eight hours earlier, she had been in New York. The flight itself was tiring, she had been weighed down by anxiety, and walked into a scene of hysteria; and she had confessed that she was on bad terms with her mother, and that she was afraid that her mother was in danger.

She finished the drink.

"I must go," she said, and stood up. "You've been very good." She held out her hand, and the grip was firm. "Thank you, Mr West."

"All I want is to find the truth," said Roger. He led her out, keeping a hand slightly on her arm. He opened the front door, and as she stepped on to the porch, tightened his grip. She turned to face him.

"Who do you think wants to kill your mother?" he asked, and the question sounded almost casual.

The light was good enough to show him the terror which sprang to her eyes. She pulled herself free and hurried away. The man at the wheel had seen them at the door, and was now getting out. The street lamp, not far away, shone on long fair hair and a smiling face – that of a younger James Liddel. This was Anthony, the libertine of a son.

Neither brother nor sister spoke.

3

NIGHT CALL

It was nearly one o'clock.

Roger sat with a whisky and soda by his side, cigarette between his lips, and his right hand on the arm of his chair. He wanted to snatch up the telephone receiver the moment the bell rang, and so avoid waking Janet. He kept yawning. The stimulus of the late visitor began to fade, his eyes were heavy. Unless he gave himself something to do, he would doze off. He stood up, to get a book – and the telephone bell rang.

He snatched up the receiver.

"West speaking."

"Hallo, Handsome," said Evans, the man to whom he had spoken earlier. "Word's just come in about Francesca Liddel. She went straight to 11 Maybury Crescent. The driver was her brother, Anthony, and it was his car. She's still there. So is Anthony—and the car's outside. It looks as if they may be going on somewhere else, doesn't it?"

"Could be," said Roger. "Has our nurse arrived there?"

"She'll be on the job at any moment. Burnaby's covering the couple, and a patrol car is standing by to flash a message if anything turns up. Want to be informed?"

"Yes," said Roger. "I'll wait up for a bit."

"How you love keeping your nose to the grindstone!"

Roger laughed, and rang off.

It could easily be that he was making a mountain out of a molehill. Francesca might simply be waiting for the arrival of the police nurse, before leaving Maybury Crescent. If she were on bad terms with her mother, there would be nothing noteworthy about her going to spend the night at Anthony Liddel's flat; her own was probably shut up. He was allowing his feeling of disquiet to get the better of him; he'd be far better off in bed, as well as fresher to cope next morning. There was a lot to do before James Liddel went up before the magistrate.

He yawned again; and then heard a creak outside.

He sat up sharply, and stared at the door. But there was nothing stealthy about the movements – someone was coming downstairs.

He was by the door when it opened, and Janet appeared. She looked pale, the pupils of her eyes were heavy with sleep, her dark hair was tousled. She wore an old grey-blanket type dressing-gown, with a fitted waist; and her feet were bare.

"That's a good idea," said Roger, "catch a cold." He kissed her.

"Why on earth don't you come to bed?" Janet grumbled. "Aren't I more attractive than whisky?"

"Much. But you'd lure me to sleep."

“Some people believe in sleeping at one o’clock in the morning,” said Janet. Sleepiness, the shine of cream on her face, and her untidy hair didn’t make her unattractive; and even without lipstick, her lips were red. “What’s the matter?”

“One or two unexpected things about the Liddel case, that’s all.”

“Who were you talking to, just now?”

“I thought you were asleep. The Yard.”

“I don’t mean on the telephone, I mean the woman.”

Roger chuckled. “Ears like an owl! My sweet, she’s lovely. Only twenty-five, too. She has everything—and she sat in your chair and made herself at home.” He kissed Janet again, on the forehead. “Now that you’re nice and jealous, go back to bed.”

“I can’t sleep.”

“I don’t believe it.”

Janet stifled a yawn; and said shrewdly: “You’ve been worried about Liddel all the time, haven’t you? Has something else turned up?”

“I’m probably just wasting my time.”

“You’d waste it more comfortably upstairs,” said Janet. “You can always get up again.”

“I think there’ll be a call in the next half hour, if it’s coming,” said Roger.

“All right,” said Janet. “Tell me all about it.”

She sat in the chair where Francesca had sat, and the tiredness faded as she listened. A sense of contentment fell upon Roger, lessening his disquiet. He liked nothing better than talking to Janet; there was no one else to whom he could talk so freely of odd, sometimes illogical, and certainly unorthodox thoughts. He forgot that he was tired.

Before he’d finished, the telephone bell rang again.

“There it is,” said Janet, superfluously.

“West here.” Roger had the receiver at his ear.

“Just to report that our nurse is with Mrs Liddel and the others have gone off,” said Inspector Evans. “They’re at Anthony Liddel’s flat, in Hillcourt Mews, and he’s garaged the car. It looks as if they’ll be there all night. Shall I tell Burnaby he can come off duty?”

“No, not yet,” said Roger. “I’m going along there.”

“Right.”

The Yard man rang off.

Janet stood up, and said: “You get worse and worse, darling. Why must you go out, when everything seems to be going smoothly?”

“The sober truth is that I can’t keep away from her,” said Roger. “Francesca, I mean. The ripeness of her beauty attracts me like flowers the bees. When you see her, you’ll know what I mean.”

“Now tell me why you want to see her.”

Roger shrugged.

“She’s tired, nervous, edgy, and more likely to talk freely now than if I wait until the morning, when she’ll have had a good night’s sleep. If she really suspects that her mother might be murdered, she knows a lot we don’t

know. You must confess that the psychology is good."

Janet sniffed.

"I wonder what psychology would tell you to do if she were fifty-three and had hairs sprouting from her chin."

Roger put his head on one side, looked at her steadily, and then quite suddenly pulled her towards him and kissed her fiercely. She was still breathless when he went out.

Roger stopped his car in Hillcourt Street, which was between Grosvenor Square and Park Lane. It was a short, wide thoroughfare, with tall grey houses on either side. Here and there a street lamp shone. There were no lights at any of the windows of the houses. He left the car at a corner, near Hillcourt Mews. This was a narrow cul-de-sac, and there were a hundred similar places in London. Used at one time as stables for the horses and carriages belonging to the people who lived in the great houses nearby, the buildings in the mews had been converted into garages and flats. A single electric light glowed over the wide green doors of a garage, a window showed a light. The road was cobbled, it was difficult to walk silently.

Roger reached the spot where the mews widened into a square which formed the cul-de-sac, and saw the figure of a man standing in one corner, partly concealed by the shadows.

"Burnaby?" he whispered.

Burnaby's answering whisper, like his shadow, was gigantic.

"Yes, sir." He came forward, moving with unexpected stealth. "It is Mr West, isn't it?"

"Yes. All quiet?"

"They're still up," said Burnaby, pointing to the light, on the second floor. "Been here about an hour, now. I haven't heard a sound since I came."

"No callers?"

"No."

"Seen any shadows at the window?"

"I can't say I have," said Burnaby.

"All right," said Roger. "I'm going to have a word with them. Stay here, in case I want you to telephone a message."

"Right-ho," Burnaby said, still whispering. He withdrew to his corner, and Roger approached the flat.

The front door was reached by a flight of stone steps with a single handrail. He went up slowly, thoughtfully, turning over in his mind what he would say to Francesca. If she held a secret, she would be more likely to divulge it now than at any other time; that was his only excuse for calling. He reached the front door, and pushed; it was locked. The light showed on a Yale lock, a bell, and a letterbox; there was no knocker.

He pressed the bell, and heard it ringing. He waited, expectantly, but there was no answer. He pressed again; there was still no answer. He drew back, and looked up at the lighted window, but there was no shadow against it. He saw Burnaby, moving forward, and pressed the bell for the third time.

There was still no response.

"Burnaby," he called in a loud whisper.

Burnaby quickly reached the foot of the steps.

"There isn't another entrance to this place, is there?"

"Not that I know of, and I know the district pretty well. Won't they answer?"

"They haven't, yet. They may be dog tired."

"But why leave the light on?" Burnaby asked, and Roger turned to look at him.

It was a fatal moment.

He heard nothing as he looked down at Burnaby, but as he turned back again, the door burst open. The shadowy figure of a man, wearing a trilby hat, his face covered with a scarf, rushed at him with an arm raised, a weapon in it; a hammer. He smashed a blow at Roger and caught him on the shoulder and sent him reeling back against the rail. Roger began to topple over. Surprise, pain from the blow, and the sudden fear of crashing to the ground, drove everything else out of his mind. He groped for the handrail as he toppled, brushed it with his fingers but couldn't get a grip. His feet left the steps. He was vaguely aware of shouting and scuffling, lurched sickeningly backwards, and then got a grip. As he steadied himself, he twisted his wrist painfully, and nearly let go. But he steadied, and his feet touched the steps again.

He heard a man running, and caught a glimpse of a dark figure near the entrance to the mews. Another dark figure, immediately beneath him, was moving slowly.

"Burnaby!"

Burnaby grunted something unintelligible, and managed to get up. He stood swaying, with a hand at his face. Roger hurried down the steps. Burnaby had been hit across the forehead, and there was blood on his cheeks and his nose; he was useless for the moment. The sound of footsteps had faded. The assailant was safely away now, there wasn't much chance of catching him up.

Roger said: "Take it easy, then telephone the Yard and put out a call."

Burnaby muttered again.

Roger left him, and hurried up to the flat. There was no light down here, but a faint glimmer showed at the top of a flight of stairs; this was a maisonette, with two floors. The bottom floor was greyly dark, but he could pick out a shape of doors and a narrow passage alongside the stairs, as well as some oddments of furniture. He went along the passage, flinging open the door, and found an empty dining room and a large kitchen, spacious and bright with tiles and chromium. There was no back door. He went up the carpeted stairs, making little sound. The thumping of his own heart seemed loud. He could hear nothing else, no sound of movement above.

There was a small landing, and three doors led off it; the light came from a door immediately in front of him. He opened the first door and switched on the light. This was a large bedroom, obviously a man's room. In a corner

were golf clubs, the pictures were all sporting prints or photographs. There was a small writing-table and a corner bookcase. The double bed was undisturbed.

The second unlit room was a bathroom.

In all, he had been here for two minutes when he opened the door of the lighted room. His heart thumped, he wondered if he had wasted unnecessary time. But he'd had to make sure that there was no danger of another attack, that no one else was lurking there.

He thrust the door wide open.

Francesca Liddel sat in an armchair. Her hands were tied in front of her, her ankles were tied to the legs of the chair, with her legs wide apart, so that her skirt was stretched and pulled up over nylon-clad knees. She had something in her mouth, with the end poking out; it looked like a handkerchief. Her eyes were wide open, showing terror far greater than he had seen at Bell Street.

He thought it eased when she recognised him.

Then she turned her eyes away, and he looked towards the corner of a large sitting room.

Anthony Liddel lay on the brown carpet, with his legs bent. He was on his back, with one arm across his chest, and his head turned away from Roger. He didn't move. There was blood on his ear and dark stains on the carpet.

He was lying by the side of an open safe.

4

THE EMPTY SAFE

Roger went on one knee beside Anthony Liddel, and raised his head gently. At the front, the blond hair was matted with blood. It was impossible to tell whether the injury was serious or not; it looked bad. Roger felt his pulse: it was beating. He stood up and went across to the telephone. Burnaby might have called for help already, but Roger dialled the Yard, arranged for a doctor to come out at once, and replaced the receiver. Then he checked that the bleeding had stopped; there was little he could usefully do for the man.

He took out his knife, approached Francesca, and cut her free of her bonds. She drew her legs together, and uttered a queer, moaning sound, because of the gag. Her wrists were red and swollen, the string – rough parcel string – had been tied tightly.

Roger pulled gently at the cloth in her mouth; it was a handkerchief, damp in places with saliva. It had been crammed in, must almost have choked her. He put the handkerchief on a table, went out, and came back with a glass of water from the bathroom, and a towel. She hadn't the strength in her wrists to hold the glass, but sipped the water gratefully.

He wiped her lips with the towel.

Anthony Liddel stirred.

Francesca croaked a word which Roger couldn't catch.

"He'll be all right," he said, and took her wrists and began to massage them gently. She winced with the pain of returning circulation, and both wrists glowed a fiery red. When he stopped, her mouth was less stiff and she could speak more freely.

"Thank you. I'll manage."

Roger turned away from her. She made an effort to stand up, but couldn't. He helped her across to a couch, and she sat down, drew her legs up, and began to massage her ankles. Her face was pale from the pain. Roger went across to Liddel, whose eyelids were flickering.

Roger knelt in front of the safe.

It was a combination wall safe, built unusually near the floor. It hadn't been forced; obviously the combination number had been used. Roger breathed on the bright steel of the handle and the circular surround, but there was no sign of fingerprints on the clouded surface.

Liddel groaned.

A small desk, with its drawers wide open, stood near the safe. Papers and small books lay in disorder in each drawer. A bottle of ink had been upset in one, and a green mess spread over papers and wood; some of the ink had dripped on to the carpet. Nothing else in the room appeared to have been disturbed.

There was a shout from downstairs.

"You there, West?"

"Yes, come up!"

Heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs. The doctor came in, a short, stocky man with thick-lensed glasses, wearing a dark suit and carrying a bright yellow pigskin bag. He had obviously dressed hurriedly – his waistcoat was buttoned on the wrong holes and his collar and tie were awry. He was Dr Maltby, one of the oldest and most experienced police surgeons attached to Scotland Yard.

He grunted. "Someone's been having a nice time." His gaze raked the room, settled for a moment on the girl, then on Anthony Liddel. He went across to the injured man, whose eyes were flickering open, and who was trying to sit up. Another man came in, a Detective Sergeant from the Yard.

"Seen Burnaby?" asked Roger.

"He's been sent home, sir—nothing to worry about."

"Good. Have you got equipment with you?"

"It'll be up in a moment, sir."

"Go through this room and then the rest of the flat. You'll find that the man we want's been canny with his fingerprints, but he may have made a mistake about something else. Be careful with that handkerchief." He pointed to the one he had taken from Francesca's mouth. "Take special care with the safe and the desk, and put all the papers on one side. I want to have a look at them."

"Right, sir."

Other men were coming up the stairs and when they appeared, had fingerprint and general equipment with them; one man had a camera. Flashlights made lightning in the room as photographs were taken.

Dr Maltby stood up from Liddel.

"Not too bad." Maltby kept his voice low. "He could stay here with a nurse."

"Get him to a nursing home and have one of our men stand by him," Roger said. "It wouldn't do any harm if he got an idea that he was in a bad way."

Maltby grinned.

"Up to your usual tricks? If he thinks he's at death's door, he might talk."

"You don't have to tell him what door he's at."

Maltby shrugged, and turned away. He had cleansed Liddel's head and hair, and the victim was now lying near the desk, with a cushion behind his head. Roger went across to Francesca, who was sitting up and still gently rubbing her ankles; her movements had much more freedom now.

"Can you walk?" Roger asked.

"Where do you want to take me?"

"To another room."

She got up without assistance, and was able to walk ahead of him. No one was outside the room, but a policeman in uniform stood at the foot of the stairs. Roger led the way into the bedroom, and left the door ajar. The girl went slowly to the bed, and sat down heavily, but wriggled round so that

she could adjust a pillow for her back. She had straightened her hair, and looked much more composed; there was no puffiness or white ridges at the corners of her mouth, but her wrists were still red. Her stockings had been laddered, and her ankles were swollen where the string had been.

"Now supposing you tell me everything," said Roger.

"I—I hardly know what did happen."

"Bad memory," said Roger, tartly.

"It was such a shock. I was going to stay here for the night. Anthony opened the door, and I came in—and a man dropped a sack over my head and shoulders. Before I knew what was happening—"

'Where did this happen?"

"In the living room," she said. "Anthony opened the door and groped for the light, but the sack was dropped over me before it went on. Then I heard Anthony fall, and cry out. I tried to get free, but before I could, someone carried me to that chair, and tied my ankles to it. Then he attacked Anthony again."

"You still had the sack over your head."

"Yes," she said.

"Where's the sack?" asked Roger.

"He stuffed it into his pocket before he left," Francesca said quickly. "But I could hear when it was over me. He was threatening Anthony; he wanted the combination number of the safe."

"And got it."

"I wouldn't blame anyone for giving it!" Francesca flashed the answer.

"No one's being blamed," said Roger. "And then?"

"The man took the sack off. He had a scarf over his face, and a hat pulled over his forehead—I could only see his eyes. He tied my hands together, and then started to ask me questions—he wanted something he hadn't found in the safe."

"What?"

"Documents of some kind."

"Didn't he specify what they were?"

"He just said: 'those papers' and seemed to think I knew what he was talking about."

"And didn't you?"

Francesca said slowly: "No, I did not."

She was quite self-possessed, now, and did not appear to be frightened. The wallpaper was cream coloured, and her dark hair showed against it, wavy and attractive, not unlike Janet's. The room was comfortably furnished, and the girl graced it. There was a slight colour in her cheeks, and her eyes were a little too bright, as if she were feverish.

"So he wanted some mysterious papers which he didn't find in the safe, although he emptied the safe. Do you know what was in it?"

"Of course I don't!"

"You've been out of the country for three months, so perhaps you don't."

She flushed.

“Do you have to be insulting?”

“Insulting?” Roger seemed shocked. “I simply want to get at the truth – why you were attacked and who attacked you? And I have to assume that everyone concerned could be keeping something back. That is a policeman’s disadvantage. What did the man look like?”

“He was about your build.”

“And his clothes?”

“He wore a dark overcoat and a trilby hat – a very old grey trilby, there were stains round the band.” She paused. “He wore thin cotton gloves, dark blue. And black shoes. There was a hole in the heel of his right sock.”

Roger smiled. “That’s not bad observation, anyhow.”

“I had plenty of time to study him,” she said. “After he’d knocked Anthony out again, he opened the safe and took everything out, and then ran through every drawer in the desk. I think he would have looked in other places—but then the front door bell rang.”

“It’s lucky I came.”

“Why did you come?”

“To try to find out why you told me only half the truth tonight.”

She didn’t answer.

There was a tap at the door, and Maltby looked in. “He’ll be all right, but I’ve sent him to a nursing home for the night,” he said. “Any help wanted here?”

“Need a doctor?” Roger asked the girl.

“I’m quite all right,” she said.

Maltby strolled across the room, took her left hand, and felt her pulse. He made no comment, but when he had finished, looked at her wrists and ankles.

“You ought to have a salve for those, or you’ll be stiff and sore in the morning. I’ll send something round to be rubbed in gently. Don’t forget to do it.”

“I won’t,” she promised.

“And then you ought to get to bed, and have some hot coffee,” said Maltby. “Plenty of sugar. This has been a shock, even for a girl with nerves of steel.” He had a sardonic way of talking, and kept one eye half closed. Without any further comment, he went out of the room, leaving the door ajar.

“Where has he sent Anthony?” Francesca demanded.

“I’ll find out and let you know,” Roger promised. He stood by the side of the bed, looking down at her. A wardrobe mirror showed reflections of both of them, her face pale, his tanned and set. She met his gaze.

He said: “Murder’s been done. You say you don’t believe your father did it. The evidence is very strong against him. He could be hanged. Now you come along, obviously have reason to believe your mother is in danger, and get attacked like this. You may not know who attacked you, or what the assailant wanted, but you know why you’re frightened for your mother. It’s time you told me.”

She didn't answer.

"Your brother could die."

She started. "No! The doctor said—"

"He could die. And if the blow had been harder, he'd be dead by now. You're probably not safe yourself. There are other hard facts. The bad blood between you and your mother, for one thing—why is that? What's the truth about your family, Miss Liddel? Who do you think might want to attack your mother?"

She sat tight-lipped.

"You don't have to answer," Roger said harshly. "There's nothing I can do to make you. But if you keep silent and there is more murder, the blame will be partly yours. And whatever your secret is, it might throw new light on your cousin's death, and make the difference between life and death for your father. Remember that."

She didn't speak.

"The trouble with beauty is that it often leads to arrogance," Roger said. "Arrogance won't help you or anyone with the police. It's bad policy to withhold material evidence. It suggests that there might be collusion between you and the criminals. Ever thought of that?"

"It's nonsense!"

"It's not nonsense," Roger said. "Personally, I don't trust you. I wish I could. It's a bad thing not to be trusted by the police, Miss Liddel."

She turned her head away, towards the door, looking distraught and dishevelled. The door opened wider, and there was a bright flash – of a camera flashlight. Francesca gasped; from the door a man chuckled. Roger strode across the room, but by the time he reached the door, the man who had taken the photograph was halfway down the stairs. He didn't look round, but called:

"Nice picture for the *Record* in the morning. Handsome West and Lovely Suspect!" He reached the narrow hall, dodged the policeman who now stood outside, and disappeared.

5

THE PHOTOGRAPH

Roger called: “Constable, stop that man and bring him up here!” His voice echoed down the stairs, and the constable’s reply floated back; there was another scurry of footsteps. Roger turned back into the room, to see Francesca sitting up, one hand at her throat, the other stretched out. She seemed to have broken down completely.

“He mustn’t publish that, I look—”

“You’ve been attacked, you wouldn’t expect to look at your best,” Roger said soothingly.

“Oh, please get it back!”

“I can’t tell a newspaper what it can print and what it can’t. The cameraman had no right here, but now that’s he’s taken his picture, he’ll probably get away with it. His only crime was trespassing, and it wouldn’t stand up in a case like this.”

She closed her eyes.

“Didn’t he name the paper?”

“The *Record*.”

“Can’t you ask them not to print it?”

“It would give a strong reason for them splashing it all over the front page,” said Roger. “Miss Liddel, whom do you think will attack your mother?”

She didn’t answer.

“I hope you don’t start talking when it’s too late,” Roger said, and went out and slammed the door, but didn’t close it properly. He stood outside for a few seconds, hearing no sound. The policeman hadn’t returned, and there was silence outside. He opened the door a few inches, and peered in. The girl still sat on the bed, staring straight ahead of her, as if at a ghost. Yet there was a photograph on the table behind her, exactly like that on James Liddel’s desk. So her brother had kept a picture of her in his own room, probably taken by his mother.

Roger left the door ajar, and went into the room where he had found the two victims.

The men were finishing their search, and Sergeant Peel, tall, blond, and good-looking, one of the brightest of the Yard’s young men, straightened up from the desk.

“Anything?” asked Roger.

“Some odds and ends of papers, but I don’t think they’ll help much. Only two clear sets of prints – probably Liddel’s. There are a few smears made earlier, I’d say two or three days ago.” Peel wouldn’t guess about that. “There isn’t much doubt that the man kept his gloves on all the time. The handkerchief has Liddel’s monogram on it.”

"Go through the place with a comb," Roger urged, "and I'll have a look at everything in the morning. Meanwhile, keep an eye on the girl."

"Will she be staying here all night?"

"Wherever she is, we want her covered."

"I'll see to it," Peel promised.

Roger went downstairs, and found a nervous constable, who confessed that he'd been bamboozled into allowing the photographer in, and hadn't been able to catch him. There was little point in giving a reprimand. Roger nodded, said: "Can't be helped," and went to his car.

His wrist was painful, where he had twisted it, but otherwise he felt fit and fresh.

He drove to the nearest telephone kiosk, called the Yard, and learned that Anthony Liddel had been taken to the Fairley Nursing Home, near Kensington High Street; it was only ten minutes' drive away.

He soon pulled up outside the house, one in a tall terrace; the front hall light was on, but the door was closed.

A middle-aged woman greeted him.

"What is it you want?" She sounded testy.

"I know we're being a nuisance," Roger said, and showed his card. "I'd like to see Mr Liddel."

"Oh, the *police*." She drew back, her manner changing at once. "I'd no idea, everybody seems to be calling tonight. This way, please." She scurried towards the stairs.

"How is he?" asked Roger.

"Oh, there's nothing serious." The woman stopped at that, led him up two flights of stairs, and opened a door.

Anthony Liddel was lying back in bed, heavily bandaged but conscious; when he saw Roger he grinned. There wasn't much vigour in him, but the grin was likeable; in all he'd had to do with Liddel's son, Roger had found him amiable if unhelpful.

"What, another?" Liddel asked.

Roger said: "Thanks, that's all," and the woman withdrew. A police sergeant, wearing a white nurse's coat, sat in the corner of the room. Roger waved him to stay in his place. "Another what?" asked Roger.

"Visit from a copper, Robert, policeman, bluebottle, flat-foot." Liddel's voice was husky. "I can smell you people. You especially. I expected you to turn up."

"Crooks get that habit," said Roger.

"Only I'm not a crook! I'm not at death's door, either, and no one can scare me into making reckless statements."

"Who tried to?"

"Your doctor friend. Care to tell me what happened? I don't mind admitting that I thought I was on the way to Kingdom Come; it was a welcome relief to wake up, even with you around. Who rescued me?"

"I did."

"Pity," said Liddel. "That puts me in your debt."

"You can cancel the debt. What do you know that you haven't told me about?"

"Nothing."

"What did the thief come for?"

A grin spread over Liddel's pale cheeks.

"Aren't policemen wonderful? Most people know that a thief pays a call to get whatever he can lay his hands on."

"This one was after something special."

"Your guess," said Liddel politely.

"Your sister's statement."

That didn't shake the man on the bed.

"You can't take any notice of anything Frankie said tonight. She was shocked out of her wits, and I don't blame her. He handled her pretty roughly. Which reminds me, as an honest citizen, I'd like to ask for better police protection. You arrest the wrong men for murders, and let thieves get away with violence."

"We can deal with murderers and thieves, the people who cause us trouble are those who know a lot and won't talk about it."

"Listen," said Liddel, "I know you've made a fool of yourself by arresting my father, and that's *all* I know. As a sick man, I want you to get out, and let me have some rest. I also want you to look after my sister."

"Any idea why she should be worried about her picture appearing in the newspapers?"

"Frankie's funny that way – she's always disliked having her picture taken. Like me to tell you about when she was a little girl?"

"There's a good portrait of her – at Maybury Crescent."

"My mother took that – the exception to the rule. Do I have to hire someone to *throw* you out?"

Roger went out, and sat at the wheel of his car for several minutes.

It was now glaringly obvious that both Liddel and his sister were trying to hide something; probable that the something was connected with their cousin's murder. But would either of them shelter a murderer at the risk of their father's life?

Roger drove back to Chelsea, dissatisfied and uneasy. It was half-past four when he got into bed.

Detective Sergeant Peel, who made an idol of Roger West, left a reliable man at the flat, and superintended the removal of all interesting papers to Scotland Yard.

He took a turn up and down the nearby street. His own car was parked at a corner, near the mews. He was halfway along the street when he heard a cry, turned sharply, and saw the constable standing by the corner, waving to him. He hurried along, and as he reached the man, heard a car engine starting up.

"Now what?" Peel asked.

"She's going out."

"Did our man try to stop her?"

"I heard them arguing. Then she came down and went to the garage. She'll be here in a jiff."

"Just keep your eye on the mews," Peel said, and ran back to his own car. He was at the wheel when the girl drove out of the mews, and turned right, obligingly; he didn't have to turn round so as to follow her. She was soon in Oxford Street, driving fast; too fast. It wasn't unusual for the traffic lights to be ignored in the small hours, and she kept her foot down and flashed past each one. Peel watched his own speedometer; he was travelling at nearly sixty miles an hour.

Francesca slowed down at Oxford Circus and again at Haymarket. She went round Trafalgar Square into the Strand at a good pace. In Fleet Street, where the road narrowed, she slowed down; but it wasn't because she was suddenly cautious. Peel saw her head appear at the window, and she called to a man who was walking along the street. There were only half a dozen people about, but lines of newspaper vans were in the side streets.

She drove another fifty yards, and pulled into the side of the road, opposite the imposing building of the *Daily Record*.

Peel was close on her heels, and heard a man inside the building exclaim: "Well, what a surprise!"

There was a pause – and then Francesca said sharply: "Did you take that photograph of me?"

"Sure – and I'll bet it's a good one. You couldn't make a bad photo if you tried, Miss Liddel!"

By then, Peel was in the large hall. He recognised the short, stocky figure of Flash Manners, whose reputation as a press cameraman spread much farther than Fleet Street. Manners had a genial, ugly face, and was smiling up into Francesca's; he had to look up, because he was only five feet three. He had a shock of ginger hair and thousands of freckles, and managed to look like an ingenuous schoolboy. His deep voice came unexpectedly from a small, soft mouth.

"I want it back," said Francesca.

"But Miss Liddel! I risked being warned off by Handsome West to get that picture."

"I want it back."

"It's a hard life," said Manners.

"I intend to have it back. If necessary, I shall see your editor."

"Well, he wouldn't refuse to say hallo," Manners said. "And he's the boss. Shall I call him?" There were several telephones on a nearby counter, and he waved towards them. "It won't take two ticks."

Peel edged round the hall, so that he could see the girl more clearly. Her pallor struck him most; and the feverish glitter of her eyes. Her hands were clenched, as if she were making a great effort to restrain herself.

"I intend to have—" she began, and then stopped abruptly, and caught her breath. Peel watched her closely, and so didn't see the change of expression on Manners' face. The photographer looked astounded, and even

backed a pace. For Francesca's tension melted, and tears sprang to her eyes. They might have come because of the release from tension; or they might have come from the sudden collapse of her self-control.

She said: "Please, I must have it," and her voice was husky. "It can't mean so much to you. I'll pay for it—I'll gladly pay for it." She stretched out a trembling hand, and touched Manners'. "Anything you ask. Fifty pounds—a hundred. Only, please let me have that photograph back."

Manners moistened his lips.

"Any sum you ask," said Francesca.

Manners took her arm.

"Listen, Miss Liddel, I might do what you want if it were up to me, but it isn't. The Boss has it, and the block's being made, he's going to run that picture in the morning. If I know the Boss, a hundred thousand pounds wouldn't stop him from using it. You can try. I think you'll be wasting your time. Can I take you home?"

She swayed, with her eyes closed; if Manners hadn't held her tightly, she would have fallen. It was almost too much of a good thing. She seemed to be physically ill, and Manners put his other arm round her waist. She was a head taller than he; beauty and an amiable beast. Manners looked dismayed.

"It can't be that bad," he said.

Francesca opened her eyes, moistened her lips, and looked over his head.

"I must see the editor," she said. "Please take me to him."

"It won't help at all."

"Please take me to him."

Manners shrugged, looked at Peel, then turned and led Francesca Liddel into the office beyond the hall.

Peel waited for half an hour, before she returned. It was impossible to tell what had happened, she seemed to walk like an automaton. No one was with her. She stepped into her car and drove more slowly back to the mews.

Peel no longer had the slightest doubt that there was something phoney about the Liddel case.

6

CLUE

“Eh?” grunted Roger.

“Darling,” said Janet.

‘H’m?” Roger kept his eyes tightly closed.

‘Darling,” repeated Janet, and touched his shoulder.

“No,” grunted Roger.

“It’s nearly nine o’clock.”

“Eh?”

“I could use a sponge,” Janet said, in a reflective tone. “It might wake him up”

"Ugh,” said Roger, and opened one eye. It was broad daylight, and Janet was standing by the side of the bed. His vision was blurred, but she looked good. “What’s up?”

“Like some tea?”

“No!” He closed his eyes again.

“You see what I have to put up with,” said Janet.

“Let me have a go at him,” said a man in a deep voice; the unmistakable voice of Sir Guy Chatworth.

Roger opened both eyes and started up, and immediately became dizzy. But he saw that Chatworth was behind Janet and nearer the wall. He also saw that the Assistant Commissioner was dressed in morning-clothes, his hair shone with oil, his weather-roughened face was shiny.

There was a tea-tray on the bedside table. The room was fairly large, bright and attractive with flowered chintz; the furniture was all light oak.

Roger licked his lips.

“Good morning, Sir Guy.”

“You young fellows,” grumbled Chatworth. “All you think about is sleep.” His eyes twinkled. “Sit up and start taking some nourishment. I have a social engagement at Woking this morning and have to confer with the Home Office this afternoon, so I shan’t have a chance of a word with you later. What happened last night?”

“All details, or just what struck me as odd?” asked Roger, to gain time.

“I’ve had the general story.”

Roger poked his fingers through his hair.

“Miss Liddel appears to be terrified of a picture appearing in the press, and certainly hugs a secret. Anthony Liddel shares the secret. We thought he was just an amiable waster, but there’s more in him than that. I don’t know whether the theft at the flat had anything to do with Lancelot Hay’s murder, but it gives us plenty to work on. I’m going for that assailant with everything we’ve got.”

“Still want James Liddel up on charge this morning?” Chatworth asked.

"I wouldn't miss having him in dock for a fortune. I'll have two good men in the Public Gallery, watching for reactions, and Peel in Court, just to keep his eyes on the crowd. I've a feeling that something will break before long, and this wasn't the simple job we've always thought."

"Obstinate young ass," grumbled Chatworth; but he was still in friendly mood. "You've no idea why the girl resented the photograph, I suppose?"

"No. Has it appeared?"

"No," said Chatworth.

"No," said Janet, and opened the *Daily Record*, which was folded on the tea-tray. "There's nothing in here, which means that she found a way of persuading the editor not to use it."

Roger didn't speak.

Chatworth said gently: "Yes, I thought that would impress you, Roger. The *Record* is a scandal sheet, and the one way to make sure of getting scandal published in it is to ask for it to be kept out. She managed to get her own way."

"Has she any pull with the owners?"

"Up to us to find out," Chatworth said. "You've a free hand to concentrate on this new angle—I thought you'd be happier if you knew that."

"That's fine," said Roger.

"Are you sure you won't have a cup of tea?" Janet asked the Assistant Commissioner.

Roger was at his office soon after ten o'clock. He went through the papers for the Liddel charge; everything he needed was there. He didn't expect trouble from Liddel's solicitors, but had to guard against the unexpected. He intended only to make a formal charge and ask for a remand in custody.

There was no time to look at the two boxes of papers and oddments which Peel had brought from Anthony's flat.

At ten to eleven, Roger was at the West London Police Court. At five minutes past, after he had been in the dock for four minutes, James Liddel stepped down, remanded in custody for a week. There had been no sensation; no suspicious visitors – Francesca's presence in the Public Gallery could hardly be called suspicious. She looked regal and aloof; all outward sign of distress had gone. When she left the court, she pulled down a thick veil, but several photographers took pictures; she walked to her car – actually her brother's car – and drove off.

Peel followed her.

In the papers brought from the flat in the mews there seemed to be nothing to explain the burglary; and nothing to help identify the assailant. Roger spent two hours going through them, before pushing them aside. It was a little after two-thirty, and he hadn't lunched. He went downstairs to the canteen, and was halfway through boiled beef and carrots when a constable came hurrying in and made a beeline for him. It took a great deal for a Yard man to look excited; this man did.

“What is it?” asked Roger.

“Message from Mr Peel, sir – he wouldn’t wait to speak to you. He just said: ‘Get to 5 Nye Street, Putney Common, pronto.’ His very words, sir.”

“Go and start my car, will you?” Roger gulped down a couple of mouthfuls, took a swig of beer, and hurried in the constable’s wake. Peel was not a man to send a scare message; and Peel was watching Francesca.

Roger was at the wheel within five minutes, and drove fast, stopping only to ask a policeman where he would find Nye Street. It was at the edge of the small common at Barnes; Peel always called it Putney Common. There were a dozen large, gloomy houses standing in their own grounds, and approached by long, tree-lined drives. Most of the gardens were well cared for, but that of Number 5 was unkempt. Last year’s grass hadn’t been mown or scythed, trees and bushes hadn’t been pruned for two or three seasons, dark grass patches and dandelions clotted the gravel drive.

Peel wasn’t in sight.

Roger drove slowly past the house, and stopped. There was only one row of houses; on the other side of the road a grass stretch led towards the common and the trees which dotted it sparsely. In sight, but some distance away, were more big houses.

Roger walked towards the gate of Number 5. The gate, once painted light brown, was peeling badly, and looked as if it wouldn’t close. There were marks of tyres on the gravel; recent marks. He saw no sign of footsteps. Peel’s non-appearance worried him; he kept glancing up and down, expecting to see the sergeant, but five minutes passed and Peel didn’t show up.

Roger stepped inside the gate.

He could be seen from some windows of the house, but the overgrown shrubs and the low-hanging branches of oak and beech trees hid him from most of them. The house was of red brick; and at the far side there was a turret with a spire, typical of its era of Victorian architecture; there was an appearance of solidity, if nothing else, but there was no sign of Peel.

He should be on the lookout.

Roger walked farther along, then stepped off the drive on to the grass of the shrubbery. He could no longer see the house. A bramble straggled across his path.

“Peel.” he called softly.

There was no answer.

He reached a spot from which he could see the corner of the house, and the garage which stood a little way back. The garage was closed, and there was no car. The house looked deserted.

Roger approached, watching the windows. He saw no furtive movement.

There was an old-fashioned bell-pull, and the bell clanged loudly when he tugged it. The sound faded slowly, leaving an impression of greater silence. Roger waited for a couple of minutes, but didn’t ring again. He walked round the house, reached the back door, and saw an open window.

He stopped abruptly.

The window was wide open at the bottom, and from here he could see that it had been forced; the wood was splintered at one spot. He hurried forward, and looked into an empty washhouse; no one was there.

There was room to climb through.

Roger stood in the dingy washhouse, which had an old-fashioned brick copper. In one corner was a long poker, rusty and covered with dirt. He pulled his right hand glove on and took the poker.

He was surprised at the tightness of his grip.

He crept on to the open door, and trod on a loose board. It creaked, and made him jump; it was no use telling himself that he was a fool to feel jumpy; he was jumpy, and he had cause. Another door stood ajar, leading to a wide hall; and he could see a man's feet. The man was obviously lying down, and one foot was turned at an odd angle.

Roger pushed the door back gently; it swung to again. He bent down, and stepped swiftly through, prepared for an assault.

There was none; but Peel lay stretched on his back, and Peel's head was battered.

The local police surgeon was a young and prosy man.

"This is a bad business, very bad business," he said. "I can't possibly reassure you – I only wish I could. Serious injuries, no doubt – considerable bleeding from the lungs. I couldn't pass any opinion until after the X-ray examination."

Peel was already in an ambulance, on the way to the nearest hospital. The doctor and two local detectives stood with Roger in a huge, empty room. The house was untenanted, and no one had lived here for several months.

Roger had been through it, from top to bottom; he need have gone no further than the front room. Footprints in the dust which lay upon the boards showed that a man and a woman had been here. On the floor, trodden out, were two cigarette ends, each was tipped with lipstick. Peel had almost certainly followed Francesca here, but there was no clue to the identity of the man. A tradesman, passing in a van, had said that the car had left the house just after three o'clock; twenty minutes before Roger had arrived.

"Believe me, I've done everything I can, everything," said the doctor. "And you were in good time – very prompt."

"Yes. Thanks."

The local men and the doctor looked at Roger, puzzled. His face was bleak, reflecting something of the hatred stirring in him. Peel was not only a good officer, he was a good chap; there was none better. He'd come here full of enthusiasm – and he might die.

The weapon, a long-handled hammer, had been beside Peel; but the assailant had worn gloves. There was no clue on it, and little chance of finding anything apart from the blood which stained the head, and some light-coloured hairs – Peel's.

Roger said suddenly: "We may find something – how many men can you

get here at short notice, Inspector?"

"As many as you want." The local man didn't say that he thought it would probably be a waste of time. "Just tell me what you want done, and —"

He broke off, as a uniformed constable appeared in the doorway, a man of bovine expression who walked with solid, stately tread, and held something gingerly in his great hand.

"What's that?" the Inspector asked.

"Thought you might like to see it, sir. Found it in the grass. Three-quarters smoked cigar – very black kind of cigar – *chee*-root, I think. Been smoked this afternoon, all right, still a bit warm."

Roger said softly: "Now that's just what we've been looking for."

7

SEARCH FOR CIGARS

Roger put down the telephone in his office, and Eddie Day, sitting on a corner of the desk and swinging his leg, asked hoarsely:

"What's the report?"

"No change."

"He'll peg out," Eddie said, almost as if he relished the thought. "Peel's a goner, take it from me."

"Need you gloat?" Roger's voice was thin, hard.

"Now don't take me wrong, 'Andsome," Eddie protested, "no one would be sorrier than me if Peel died. Shocking thing. I've just got a feeling, that's all."

"And I've got some work to do," Roger said.

Eddie shrugged and went off. The door closed gently. There was quiet outside, until a tram clattered along the Embankment. There was no sound in the passage – the Yard seemed to be hemmed in by the quiet. Roger went out, and downstairs to the canteen. On the way, three men asked if he had any news of Peel. When he reached the canteen, there was a sudden silence; and in any case, the talk had been muted. In every man's mind there was a grim determination to get the assailant. Police work should be impersonal and dispassionate; an affair of this kind put passion into it.

A man called out: "Any news?"

"No change," said Roger. He went to the bar and asked for a cup of tea. "Anyone here with time on his hands? I don't mean duty time."

"Plenty." That was the first speaker, and there were murmurs from others. "What do you want?"

"I want to find out who smokes a thin, black cigar, called Ramonez," Roger said. "They're made by a Dutch firm." He took a packet from his pocket, about six inches by three. It had a gay picture on it, of a smiling man smoking a long cigar. "They're sold in tens and fifties – the tens are packed like this, the fifties in wooden boxes. Probably only one tobacconist in ten stocks them. We're working the wholesalers officially, but Ramonez cigars have been on the market for a long time; it's impossible to be sure which retailers have them. Some may have been in stock for years. We need to find out who's bought some recently – within the past few months, anyhow. We haven't the men to put on to this job without neglecting other work, but we want to get hold of those buyers pretty quickly."

He passed the box round.

"Any idea of the locality?" a man asked.

"None at all – they might not have been bought in London. That would be our bad luck. I'm sending samples out to other districts; you won't be on your own with the job."

"Good enough," a man said.

Roger finished his tea.

"I think the man who attacked Peel smokes them," he said, and went out.

There was silence in the canteen, even after he had closed the door.

Back in his office, he telephoned the nursing home. Anthony Liddel had run a temperature during the day, and was likely to stay there for two or three days. His sister had visited him after the court hearing, but had neither telephoned nor called since. She hadn't been to see her mother, and hadn't returned to the flat in the mews. Roger opened the file on Anthony Liddel and ran through the list of the contents of the flat; cigarettes of three different kinds were mentioned, but no cigars had been found.

Already a call had gone out to all police stations in England, Wales, and Scotland, for news of Francesca. No report had come in. Since leaving the house on Barnes Common, she had vanished. It was impossible to say whether she had gone voluntarily. Peel couldn't talk, wouldn't be able to talk for some time, even if he fought off death. The only probable thing was that Francesca had gone to meet the man who had attacked Peel.

Anthony Liddel's car was in the garage at the mews; no one knew how Francesca had travelled to Barnes.

A little after six Roger left the office and drove to Fleet Street. The moment he stepped into the *Record*'s newsroom half a dozen men looked up and called out to him. The huge office was noisy, with typewriters clattering, telephone bells ringing, men and women talking. There were a hundred people here, at some fifty desks, and there was hardly room to walk between them. The tape was ticking out, in one corner. In another, a ginger-haired man with freckles sat looking at Roger, and grinning.

Roger went across to him.

''Hallo, Flash.''

"An honour, I'm sure." Flash Manners grinned.

"This isn't funny."

"Okay," said Manners. "Any news of Peel?"

"Touch and go."

"I didn't know him well, but I liked Peel," said Manners. "We're doing him proud. You're getting plenty of space, too, you're still the glamour boy of the Yard. What can I do for you?

"How much did Francesca Liddel pay you to destroy that photograph you took last night?"

"Oh, no, that won't wash. Strictly on the line of duty, that's me. She fixed it with the Big Shot – and that's saying something."

"Did she say why she was so anxious it shouldn't be published?"

"She didn't tell me."

"Didn't she give you a hint?"

"No," said Manners. He stood up. "If I could help you, Handsome, I'd do it right away, but there's nothing I can do. Better try the Big Shot."

The editor's office was on the next floor. Even a Yard man could not gain admittance easily. Roger went into a large ante-room, furnished luxuriously

with great armchairs and settees, a radiogram, a television set, walnut-panelled walls, bookcases, and racks filled with current issues of the better-class magazines. In this sanctum sat a middle-aged woman with prim, grey hair twisted into a bun at the back and wearing a white blouse and a grey skirt. She asked Mr West to wait, disappeared into another room, and quickly returned, to escort him to the editor's secretary. The secretary's room was smaller but no less opulent.

The secretary was tall and willowy – a surprisingly young man with delicate complexion and sleepy brown eyes and wavy hair swept back from his forehead with a centre parting. He persuaded Roger to sink into an armchair.

"Mr Cardew is in conference, Chief Inspector, but I have informed him that you are waiting. He assures me that he will see you the moment he can."

"Soon, I hope."

"I feel sure that it will only be a matter of minutes," purred the exquisite. "Is there anything I can do for you meanwhile, Chief Inspector?"

"No, thanks." Roger found a cigarette in his hand, a lighter flaming gently in front of him. "Thanks."

"Would you care for a drink?"

"No, thanks."

The exquisite smiled, as if he were delighted, and returned to his large, polished desk. There were some papers on it, but nothing to tie up with the frenzied activity in the newsroom. Roger leaned back and looked at the photographs which adorned the panelled walls. They were all good. Each director of the *Record* was there – and, above the secretary's head, a portrait of the present editor, Raymond Cardew. Cardew was a personality, and looked it; one of the strong men of Fleet Street. Almost bald, he had a huge forehead, and a broad nose; his mouth and chin had a Mussolini heaviness about them. He was brilliant and he was ruthless – and he had listened to Francesca's plea.

Why?

And why had she been so worried about that photograph appearing? Did she seriously hope to avoid her picture appearing? Was it just a phobia?

A bell rang; and the exquisite lifted the telephone.

"Yes, at once," he said, and replaced it. "Mr Cardew will be happy to see you, Chief Inspector."

Cardew's office was long, narrow, and almost austere, with a plain brown carpet, dark panelled walls; the only relief to austerity was a bowl of roses on top of a filing cabinet at one side of the huge desk. Cardew stood up. Unlike Mussolini, he was a tall man, powerful, with hunched shoulders and strong hands. His right hand crushed Roger's.

"All right, Alec." He nodded to the exquisite, who went out. "Now, how can I help the police, Mr West?" He had a deep voice, which grated a little. The portrait hadn't shown the curious light greyness of his eyes. "Whatever we can do, we will."

Roger was perfunctory. “I’m sure. Did you see Miss Francesca Liddel last night?”

“Yes.”

“Did she ask you not to publish a certain picture?”

Cardew smiled; it was only a movement of his lips, and didn’t touch his eyes.

“Yes, she did. I felt sorry for her, and was glad that I could help her. I had already decided not to use that photograph, Mr West.”

Roger said: “Oh,” as if he didn’t believe it.

“It often happens that we have to reject some of the best work,” Cardew went on. “In this case, Manners had trespassed; publication of that picture might well have annoyed the police, and we always want to co-operate, Mr West.” The smile still missed Cardew’s eyes.

“Very considerate of you,” Roger said. “Did Miss Liddel say why she was anxious not to have it published?”

Cardew deliberated.

“No, I don’t recall any explanation. She was in great distress, and very tired. I was glad that I was able to reassure her. A very lovely young woman.” Cardew moved a box of cigarettes across the desk, and chuckled. “But I’m not being fair, Mr West! This is a peculiar case. Liddel’s a highly respected man, and the recent developments show that there may be much more in it than we yet know. So—” He shrugged. “I was obliging, and later, Miss Liddel may show her gratitude with an exclusive story.”

Roger said slowly: “I see. All she wanted was the photo killed, was it?”

“That’s all she asked for,” said Cardew. “But she put up a very good show – what I think she really wanted was information. The certain thing is that although she was very upset, she was also very alert.”

“What do you think she was after?”

Cardew shrugged. “I don’t know. She wasn’t in any hurry to leave when I’d promised not to use the picture, and tried to pump me. But what would I know? I’m not the police.”

Roger said heavily: “I see.”

“Is there anything we can do to help with your sergeant? Peel, isn’t it?”

“Not yet,” said Roger. “Thanks again. If Miss Liddel comes again—”

“I’ll tell you,” promised Cardew.

Roger went to a call box and spoke to the Yard. There was no news of Francesca.

He went home.

That evening and all of the next day, tobacconists in London found a remarkable interest being taken in Ramonez cigars. Most of those retailers who stocked them sold to regular customers. By nightfall on the second day, a list of fifty-one regular smokers of the brand had been discovered, and more reports were coming in each hour. It would be several days before

each smoker could be interviewed and his movements checked on the afternoon that Francesca Liddel had disappeared.

There was no trace of her.

Three newspapers played up her disappearance: her photograph, with veil, was splashed in them and two others – but the photograph which Manners had taken didn't appear. Cardew was keeping his promise; and Cardew, with a journalist's nose for news, scented a sensational case.

Peel hovered between life and death, still unconscious. There was no report of interest from the nurses on duty, night and day, at Mrs Liddel's house. No one visited the Hillcourt Mews flat. Anthony Liddel was still in the nursing home, but likely to be out next day.

At home, Roger was silent to a point of moroseness. Out of her experience, Janet knew when to have little to say, and went out for a couple of hours to a neighbour. Roger was alone except for the two boys, asleep upstairs, when a car drew up outside.

He was sitting in his chair, with a whisky and soda by his side; time seemed to go back, he had been like this when Francesca had called. He started to his feet when the car door slammed, stood watching the passage door as footsteps sounded on the gravel drive. It might be anyone; it almost certainly wasn't Francesca. He was surprised at the way his heart thumped.

The front door bell rang.

He didn't go immediately, but finished his whisky and lit another cigarette. Before he reached the hall, the bell rang again; an impatient caller. He hadn't been able to tell for certain whether it was a man or woman. He touched the door handle as the bell rang for the third time.

He opened the door.

A man wearing a wide-brimmed, light-coloured hat, a coat which was flung open, and a tie which seemed colourful even in the shadowy light, stood there.

"Mr West?" The two words told Roger that he was an American who came from the West.

''Yes."

"I'm glad to meet you," the caller said. "I'm Al Maloney." He moved forward, right hand outstretched; Roger took it. His grip was fierce. He was handsome in a curiously attractive way, he moved easily, when he smiled his teeth showed white and glistening – but there was tension behind that smile.

"They tell me you're the man who can help find Francesca Liddel, and I sure want to meet that man."

Another car engine sounded along the street.

"You'd better come in," Roger said; and stood aside.

The other car engine sounded loud, a car raced past – and a sharp report, like a backfire, came from it. But the engine hadn't backfired. Roger caught sight of the flash from the back of the car, saw a man's face show for a split-second, but only in outline. Then he heard the American cry out, and heard a thud. Something hit the wall, and plaster fell.

Roger thrust Maloney to one side and raced towards the road.

8

CHASE

Bell Street was long and wide, with small houses standing in their own grounds on either side. Five street lamps spread a soft yellow light. The car from which the shot had been fired still moved fast towards the far end of the street and the Embankment. Roger saw the rear light as he pulled open the door of Maloney's car and scrambled in. Maloney shouted something. Roger didn't hear what it was, and didn't wait. The car was a Chrysler. He stabbed at the self-starter, and the engine turned at once; he let in the clutch. Maloney shouted again. Roger started off as the American reached the car and wrenched open the door. He climbed in, breathless.

The car in front turned left, towards the Embankment.

The Chrysler leapt powerfully along, and Roger swung out to take the turn without losing speed. No other cars were coming along the road, but the red light still glowed. Roger felt the nearside wheels bump the pavement, and shaved past a lamp standard before the car settled on the smooth surface.

Maloney slammed the door.

There were several turnings to the left; if the driver in front knew the district well, he could easily get away. He didn't turn left but right, on to the wide, smooth surface of the Embankment. Ahead, lights spanning a bridge gleamed on the smooth Thames. Lights at buildings on the other side of the river also gleamed in the reflection. The Chrysler held the road beautifully. The red light in front kept steady. Another car came towards them, and for a few seconds its headlights were on; Roger saw the leading car, long and rakish; a sports model.

He felt a sudden gush of wind.

"What—" he began.

Maloney was pushing the windscreen up; the wind was coming through that.

The leading car passed the first bridge, and seemed to be heading for the West End and the City.

"You're not forgetting that guy's got a gun," Maloney said, quite calmly.

"I'm not forgetting."

"Take it easy," Maloney said.

He also had a gun in his right hand. Roger caught a glimpse of it as they passed beneath a lamp. He was nursing it, and watching the red light. That was nearer, now; they were gaining. Two or three other cars came towards them and hummed past; in the light of one, Roger saw a man against the rear window of the gunman's car.

There was nearly a hundred yards between them.

"Can't you go faster?" Maloney demanded.

The speedometer needle was quivering on the eighty mark.

A constable standing on the Embankment shouted something; the words were carried away by the rush of wind. It was cold. A piece of grit flew in at the window and caught Roger's eye. It stung, and his eye began to water. He closed it. The other eye's vision was blurred, the red light seemed to waver – but he thought it was nearer.

Maloney said: "We'll get them."

Roger grunted – and then heard a sharp report in front, followed by a clanging sound. He hadn't seen the flash, but saw the second; that bullet struck the bonnet screen and bounced off.

Maloney fired.

The roar of the shot seemed loud, the flash bright. Roger's eyes were watering badly. He kept his foot down and fought against the blinding tears; the piece of grit was like a red-hot needle against his eye. He heard another roar of shooting, another flash – and a quivering line of light seemed to come from the car ahead.

The leading car swung across the road, turning left belatedly. As it disappeared, Maloney fired again. Then the road was blank, ahead of them.

"Faster!" shouted Maloney.

Roger gritted his teeth as he prepared to swing round the corner. He thought he heard a sound, as of screeching brakes. He took the turn as another car came along the road towards him. The driver pulled out wildly. Roger swung the nose of the Chrysler into the side turning – and then saw the car he'd been chasing, drawn up across the road. It was only fifty yards along, and the Chrysler was going at seventy. He swung left. There wasn't room on the road to pass the stationary car.

It seemed to leap at him.

The nearside wheels hit the kerb, the car lurched, wings scraped along a coping. The Chrysler lurched again, Roger lost control, and they swung round, then quivered to a standstill.

Maloney shouted: 'There they are!"

Roger couldn't see.

Maloney pushed at his door, but the handle jammed. He cursed, and banged at the handle, then pushed again. The door opened so suddenly that he nearly fell out. Roger sat with one hand at his eye, the needle pains still shooting from it, the vision of both eyes hopelessly blurred; there wasn't a thing he could do.

Maloney went racing off; Roger heard him, and heard the roar of two shots.

He climbed out, wiping his eyes. He could see light, now, but couldn't pick out the running men. He heard no more shooting, and the sound of footsteps faded. He returned to the car as new footsteps sounded, this time from behind him. He wiped his eyes, and could see a little more clearly. A uniformed policeman came rushing up, and there was another behind him, as well as several other people; they all seemed to be talking at once.

The constable drew up.

Roger said: “Along the road – be careful, they’re armed.” He added belatedly: “I’m Inspector West.”

The constable turned at once and raced towards the end of the road. Half a dozen people stopped near the two cars. The second policeman, who had heard the tail end of the orders, came up.

“Did you say Chief Inspector *West,* sir?”

“Yes. Hurry.”

“Yes, sir!”

But hurrying would do no good. If Maloney hadn’t caught up with his assailants, the police wouldn’t. Maloney might have caught a glimpse of them; might know who they were, and be able to describe them. Short of that, there was little hope of catching them.

Roger’s eye felt better; tears had washed the grit out.

Another constable came up.

“Better get some help and move these cars,” Roger said. “Do the Chrysler first. Be careful with the other, we want prints from it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Roger watched them moving the Chrysler, wondering if it would be wiser to leave the assailant’s car where it was until his men had time to go over it. He decided to do that, stationed a man at the end of the street to make other drivers take a detour and then approached the rakish-looking model. It was an old one – a Lancia. There weren’t many about. He took out his handkerchief and opened the door, careful not to touch the handle. A dozen people had now gathered and watched him curiously. Half a dozen policemen were here already, but there was no sign of Maloney or the man who had gone in pursuit.

Who was Maloney?

Roger used his torch, and its beam shone on the dashboard pocket, glistened on the windscreen and the instrument panel, reached another dashboard pocket – and then it stopped. His hand was steady at first, then shook a little. That didn’t last long.

The light shone on a familiar picture, on top of a box.

Still using his handkerchief, he pulled the box out and studied the picture more closely. It was of a smiling man, smoking a cigar; and printed in bright red were the words: Ramonez – Perfecto.

Maloney came up smiling; that didn’t mean that he was amused. He held his left arm in front of him, awkwardly. Roger was standing by the car, looking at the box of cigars.

“Found anything?” Maloney asked.

“Not much. Did they get away?”

“You bet they did – but I’ll catch up with them.” Maloney’s voice was low-pitched and bitter. “Do we have to stay in this place all night?”

“Until my squad comes to check this car, I have to stay. You needn’t. Tell me where you’re staying, and—”

“I’m not staying any place,” said Maloney, “I only arrived in London

tonight. I didn't lose any time coming to see you. My grip's in the car."

"How did you get hold of a car so quickly?"

Maloney grinned.

"I've friends in London, they had it waiting at the airport."

It might be necessary to check on his 'friends'.

"Can I go wait at your place?" Maloney asked.

"Yes. And you'll find a doctor at Number 15."

"Who said anything about a doctor?"

A police patrol car drew up; Roger sent Maloney off in it. The crowd had grown larger, but no one asked questions. Then a squad car arrived. Four men, with all the equipment needed to check over the car, tumbled out. There was a photographer, two fingerprint men, and a sergeant. Roger gave them brisk instructions – they were to test every part of the car for prints, and take everything they found in it to the Yard. He wrapped the box of cigars in his handkerchief and gave it to the sergeant, and was then driven to Bell Street in the squad car by a silent policeman. As Roger climbed out, the policeman said: "Any news of Sergeant Peel, sir?"

"No good news, yet."

"Very sorry about that, sir."

"We all are. Take the car back, will you? And have that Chrysler taken to a garage and repaired."

The front door of his house was open. He saw shadowy figures against the curtains at the downstairs window. He heard Maloney speaking, and then Janet said: "Of course it will hurt if you don't keep still."

She was standing behind Maloney, who was stripped to the waist – his shoulders were broad and bronzed, the muscles rippled. The wound, which didn't look deep or serious, was at the back of his shoulder. Janet had a bowl of red-tinged water on a table, towels, and antiseptics. She was using a sponge. Another woman, a neighbour, came bustling from the kitchen with a fresh bowl of water. She stopped at sight of Roger.

"Thank goodness *you're* all right, Mr West."

Janet started and turned. "Roger!"

"No damage," Roger said, and smiled more brightly than he felt. "Patch up the restless American." He walked in, and stood in front of Maloney, who kept his head up.

Maloney grinned.

"Your wife's a hard case," he said.

"You have to be, dealing with the hard-bitten."

"Hear him talk," said Maloney. With his hat off, he showed corn-coloured hair, rather wavy, a high forehead, and clear, grey eyes; there was something in those eyes which suggested that he was used to looking into long distances. Roger had an impression of strength and of character; Maloney was a man he could easily like.

Maloney said: "Seriously, West, I'm really sorry I brought this to you."

"You brought most of it to yourself," Roger said. "Did you see them?"

"Not close enough to say what they looked like."

“Any idea why they made a target out of you?”

Maloney grinned. “Seems they didn’t like me.”

“Any idea why they don’t like you?”

“I can imagine a thousand reasons,” Maloney said, “and I wouldn’t know which is the right one.” There was an edge to his grin. “Can’t you make a guess?”

“They didn’t want you to talk to me,” said Roger.

“Could be, I guess.” Maloney shrugged one shoulder; and grinned. “Do you keep Scotch?”

Roger poured him out a stiff one, and picked up the syphon.

“I’ll take it straight,” Maloney said. There was perspiration on his forehead, the dressing wasn’t as easy as he was making it out to be. “Thanks.” He tossed the whisky down.

Janet drew back.

“You’ll do now,” she said. “I’ve put a plaster on it, and I don’t think it’s serious. You’ll be stiff for a day or two, that’s all”

“Better than being a stiff,” Maloney said. He squinted round at the patch, but probably couldn’t see it. He picked up his shirt; there was a patch of blood on it, several spots, and a small hole.

“I’ll lend you one of Roger’s shirts,” Janet said, and hurried out. The neighbour went with her, and footsteps sounded on the stairs.

“You didn’t get hurt at all, did you?” Maloney asked.

“No.” Roger offered cigarettes.

“Thanks. I’m mighty glad about that. I wouldn’t have liked to have a cop’s death on my conscience,” Maloney said. He drew at the cigarette, then took it from his lips and held it cupped in his hand. “West, I’m asking you something, and I want the answer pretty bad. Do you think those guys have kidnapped Francesca?”

Roger said slowly: “It could be.”

Maloney growled: “If they’ve hurt her, I’ll tear them to pieces.”

9

MORE OF MALONEY

Dressed again, with his fawn-coloured coat draped over his shoulders so as to take pressure off the wound, Al Maloney sat in an armchair, leaning forward awkwardly. Janet and the neighbour were in the kitchen, Roger was in his own chair, opposite the American. Maloney's face was pale and his eyes were too bright; almost as if the excitement had brought on a touch of fever.

Roger said: "Now I hope you'll talk."

"That's my trouble, I'm always talking."

"I mean, talk sense."

Maloney grinned. "I'm beginning to feel I could like you," he said.

"That's fine. But remember I'm a cop. Why did you come from the United States?"

"To help find Francesca, and if you can think of a better reason, tell me."

"How did you know what had happened?"

"Didn't I tell you I had friends in London? I telephoned one, at the embassy, when Francesca left New York, and he called me when he heard she'd disappeared."

He was not likely to lie about having a friend at the embassy.

"Why should you be so anxious to find her?" Roger asked.

Maloney said: "I'm kind of fond of Francesca."

"Engaged to her?"

Maloney frowned. "I've known her a month. I guess you have to know Francesca more than four weeks if you want to talk about marriage. She knows the way I feel, if that's what you're asking."

"When did you last see her?"

"At La Guardia, before she took her plane."

"Why didn't you come with her?"

Maloney replied: "Because I'm that kind of a fool, I guess. I had some work to do, and considered it important." He laughed, but didn't sound amused. "Then I had that message. It didn't take me that long to hustle to New York and take the plane."

"Why did you come to see me?"

"I can read," Maloney said. "I can even read English newspapers. There were three or four which said you were the cop looking after Francesca, and I don't want to waste my time with others, so I came straight to your place."

"Where did you get the address?"

"I called a newspaper office."

"Which one?"

"The *Record*." Maloney's answers seemed frank. Except for the glitter in his eyes, he looked normal; and the catechism seemed to afford him some

mild amusement. “They were most accommodating, and they’d heard of you. You seem to have a big reputation on this side.”

“I’m just a policeman, doing my job.”

“And the most important one you’ve ever done is to find Francesca,” Maloney said. “Don’t get me wrong, West, I want to find that girl, and nothing will stop me.”

“Plenty will stop you, if you carry loaded guns about London.”

Maloney grimaced. “I always carry a gun.”

“Not in London, without a licence.”

“You can fix that – after tonight, I guess I need a gun. So do you. One of the things I don’t understand is the way your police go around without toting one.” Maloney sniffed. “It’s asking for trouble.”

“You may be allowed to keep your gun,” said Roger. “You’ve certainly used one before. You scored three hits – both wings and the petrol tank. It’s a pity they ditched the car, or they’d have run out of juice and we’d have caught up on them. It’s on the way to the Yard, now, and yours is being taken to a garage – I’ll let you know which one.”

“Thanks.”

“You were telling me why you took a plane to England,” Roger said.

“I’ve told you all I can about that,” Maloney said. “I’d take a plane round the world three times if it were to help Francesca Liddel.” He spoke quietly, soberly. “West, will you tell me something as straight as you can?”

“Try me.”

“Do you think Francesca is dead?” asked Maloney.

Roger lit another cigarette. He wasn’t prepared to say that he thought Francesca had been murdered. The strongest argument against it was a simple one: if anyone had wanted to kill her, why hadn’t she been left dead at the Barnes house? Taking her away suggested she had been wanted alive. He argued further; there was no evidence that she had been carried off against her will. The newspapers could say what they liked, Maloney could think what he liked, but for all anyone knew, she had gone willingly. He laboured that point, and the glitter in Maloney’s eyes grew bright, became almost ugly. He wasn’t so handsome as he had seemed; his face was too thin, and his long chin too bony.

Roger finished.

Maloney said harshly: “You’re telling me that you think she’s stalling around with the crooks?”

“It could be.”

“Not on your life,” Maloney said. “Not in this world.”

He sat back abruptly in his chair and banged his shoulder. He lost colour; it must have hurt badly. From that moment on, he said little. Even when he accepted Janet’s offer of the spare room for the night, he did so as if he didn’t really know what he was saying. Janet insisted that he should go to bed at once, with aspirins and a final hot toddy. Roger left him, lying on his uninjured side, just after half-past ten.

The neighbour had left by then.

Roger dropped heavily into his armchair.

"Need you go out tonight?" Janet asked. She had washed her dark hair, it was fluffy and attractive; she looked vivid and good to see as she sat on a pouf in front of him.

"I hope not – I'll call the Yard." Roger made no move to telephone. "I suppose it was reasonable for Francesca to fly home. It *was* reasonable. But why did Maloney fly over?"

"From what you said about Francesca, she would be like a magnet to *some* men."

"But was the magnetic influence strong enough? Maloney is pretty strong-willed. I'd put him down in the middle thirties. He took that shooting without turning a hair. He was armed, which means that he was half expecting trouble. He was shot at, trying to talk to me. Did someone want to prevent that, or—"

He broke off.

Janet said: "I know what you mean, darling, why not say it. Did they shoot at Maloney? Or did they shoot at you?"

He couldn't be sure.

Janet felt sure, but that was partly emotional. Yet there was more to indicate that he had been the intended victim than that Maloney had been. If Maloney had told the truth, he had come here because he was passionately in love with Francesca. He wasn't likely to be put at the business end of a bullet just for that. Either he had a different reason or the shooting had been coincidental with his arrival.

He called the Yard.

"You'd better come over," said Inspector Evans, "there's a lot of stuff to be looked at."

"All right," Roger didn't ring off. "Any news of the Liddel girl?"

"No."

"Peel?"

"A rather better report," said Evans.

Roger was more cheerful when he left. The news about Peel also cheered Janet; anything that would make her cheerful tonight was doubly welcome. Roger drove to the end of Bell Street, and pulled up alongside a constable.

"General patrol or watching my place?" Roger asked.

"Just the beat, sir."

"Telephone your station and tell them I'd like a special watch kept on my house, will you?" Roger asked. "And no one is to be admitted, except Mr Mark Lessing. Have someone watch who knows Mr Lessing."

"Yes, sir," said the constable.

No one was in Roger's office. It was cold. He sat down and dialled a Kensington number, but there was no answer. He told the operator to keep trying it. Mark Lessing, a friend of his and Janet's over the years, would gladly spend the night at Bell Street. With someone else there, Roger would

be happier. He went along to the Fingerprints Office, a small one where two men were standing over a wide bench, which was dusted with grey powder. In a corner were dozens of articles, bottles, tins, hammers – a great variety of them, waiting for collection; they had been tested for fingerprints on one case or another, and were no longer wanted. On another bench stood several things, waiting for test.

One of the men, tall and spindly and wearing enormous horn-rimmed glasses, looked up.

"Just on that car job, Mr West."

"Found much?"

"Not so much. Some prints, but there was nothing on the steering wheel or the door handle. They wore gloves tonight, all right. Picked up a few on the dashboard, we've got photographs of them. I'm doing a box of matches now, got a spanner, a pipe, an AA handbook, and some insulating tape to finish. We won't be long."

"Send the reports in, will you?" asked Roger. He went out, but turned away from his office, and went to the Ballistics Department. Two men, one in his shirtsleeves, were peering through an elaborate-looking microscope at a bullet which was fastened into a brass vice. One was Evans, who had the indefinable look of a Welshman but not a trace of Welsh accent.

"They the bullets out of the Chrysler?" asked Roger.

"Yes." Evans moved from the instrument. "Smith & Wesson •32."

"So it was an English gun."

"And why not?" asked Evans.

"I can always hope. Can we trace the bullets?"

"Should be able to," Evans said. "We've been pairing them up with other bullets we've never identified, but no luck – we haven't any record of that same gun being used before." Evans, who was a general utility man at the Yard, looked at the ballistics expert. "But he'll keep trying. Anything else?"

"Not yet."

Roger went along to the office, and was there for ten minutes before the final fingerprint reports were brought in. There was no record of any of the prints found on the car or the things in the car – they'd not been made by anyone with a record. Several of the prints coincided with those found on the box of Ramonez cigars.

"Were these all new, or several days old?" asked Roger.

"Some of both," said the fingerprint man.

"And those on the box?"

"New and old. I'd say the man who usually drove the car smoked those cigars."

"Will that help?" asked the fingerprint man.

"Sooner or later, yes. Get them enlarged and leave some copies on my desk, will you? Then send them round to all London stations, as soon as you can. Follow that with all provincial police headquarters, with requests for them to copy and send to all branches. If we can find that fine gentleman, we'll be halfway there."

Evans came in.

"Halfway where?" he demanded.

"To the man who was at Barnes when Peel was attacked," said Roger, "that's as far as we want to get at the moment." He stifled a yawn. "Sorry. There's another job for you, Evans. Contact New York and find out if they can help us with information about a Texan or Arizonian named Maloney, Al Maloney. He carries a Colt •32, and is an expert with it. He left yesterday on the Clipper and reached London this afternoon – or that's what he says. Five feet eleven, lean, corn-coloured hair, bony chin, grey eyes, no other distinguishing marks. Better cable that and ask them to telephone if they can help."

"So that's why you thought it might be a foreign gun," Evans said. "I'll do it right away."

"Thanks."

It was a glum ride home. Roger didn't quite know why.

The policeman on duty outside his house reported all well; there had been no callers. Janet was in bed, and drowsy. Roger went to sleep thinking of Francesca.

He was awake soon after seven; not willingly. Shrieks from the boys forced their way through his consciousness – and Janet sat up sharply in bed, then swung herself out of bed. The door opened and the shrieks were deafening; but happy shrieks.

"Richard! Scoopy!" Janet's voice had an edge to it; they'd woken her, too. "What are you doing there?"

There was a law in the household that each boy must stay in his own room until the alarm went off, at seven-fifteen. They seldom broke the law. Now, as Roger opened one eye, he saw Scoopy, huge for his seven years, with straight hair falling untidily over his forehead and broad pale face, standing in front of Janet. His dressing-gown was a little too small for him. Richard, younger by a year and shorter by a head, stood by, looking tousled, flushed, and guilty. He was much thinner, and his dressing-gown was too large for him. Neither wore their slippers.

"Go to your room, Scoopy!" Janet was beginning to relent. Scoopy sensed it, gave a quick grin, and turned and scuttled to his room.

"It was Scoop—" began Richard.

"Don't tell tales! Go to your room."

Richard hung his head, in a knowing fashion, for usually it brought full forgiveness, and went slowly and sadly back to his own tiny room. The door closed with a sharp click, and silence reigned.

Janet came back to Roger.

"That'll wake Mr Maloney," she said. "I wonder if he likes morning tea."

"Orange juice or coffee, more likely," said Roger. He looked past Janet towards the main spare room door, which was opposite the bedroom. He frowned. "See that?"

''What?"

"The door's not closed properly." Roger swung himself out of bed and

hurried across the landing, hitching up his pyjamas as he went. He pushed the door wider open. He made no comment, but Janet exclaimed: “He’s gone! “

A pair of Roger’s pyjamas were on the bed, slippers by the side of it, but Maloney, clothes, Stetson, and all, had gone. On the dressing-table was a short note, thanking Janet, explaining nothing.

10

THE HAT

"Daddy," said Scoopy.

"Yes, old chap?" Roger was on the toast and marmalade.

"Have you got to be at the office *very* early this morning?"

"Not so very early," Roger grinned.

Richard, shifting on his chair with eagerness, piped up: "Then p'r'aps you could take—"

"I was asking!" cried Scoopy, flushing with indignation. "Mummy, wasn't I asking? I *hate* Richard!"

"Now, Scoopy—"

"And I hate *you*!" shrilled Richard. "It's not fair, it was my idea."

"It wasn't—"

"Any more of this, and I will *not* take you to school in the car," said Roger, in a deep voice.

It was as if he had waved a wand of peace.

"Coats and caps," said Janet, five minutes afterwards, and the boys scrambled out of the dining room.

Roger lit a cigarette, and Janet said: "They stopped you thinking about work for five minutes, anyhow. Darling—"

"Hm-hm?"

"Did that man shoot at you or Maloney?"

"Listen," said Roger, getting up and crossing to her. He put an arm about her shoulders. "I'm a magician to the boys sometimes, but I don't really qualify for second sight."

"That means you think it was at you."

"I can't think of a single reason why anyone should try to drill a hole through me. But to be on the safe side, I'm going to have you and the boys watched today, and I'll ask Mark to spend a bit of time here. The odds are that Maloney was the intended victim. What did you think of him?"

"I don't know. He was so sure of himself, perhaps a bit too cocksure. But I thought he meant what he said about Francesca Liddel."

"Yes. Surprisingly long way from her father, aren't we – we've almost forgotten that he's languishing in Brixton, awaiting the next police court hearing." Roger kissed her on the lips. "I'll try to be back early."

The boys were playing boisterously in the hall. They led the way to the garage at the side of the house. Sitting beside him while he let in the clutch and explained the working of each instrument, fascinated them. At last, he was on the road, Janet waved, the boys called shrill goodbyes, and sat back to revel in a ten minutes' ride. Roger opened the door for them outside the school, and watched them as they walked off, firm friends again, Scoopy much bigger, and rather heavy, Richard walking with natural grace. They

turned and waved, then started what seemed like an argument with two boys about the same age.

Roger hummed as he drove on to the Yard.

There was nothing new on his desk. He went along to the fingerprint room, and found a new man on duty. He glanced round the walls, looking at the heap of discarded articles in one corner. On the side of the pile was an old trilby hat. It had a curly brim, as if it had been weathering the storms for years, and the once black band was stained in some and bleached in other places.

"Where did that come from?" he asked, picking it up.

"Brought in with the rest of the stuff, sir."

"Stuff from where?"

"The car you chased, sir."

"Oh. Any idea who brought it in?"

"I can find out."

"I'll find out, thanks," said Roger. He took the hat with him to the office, and put it on his desk. Looking at it reminded him of Francesca. He called up the sergeant in charge of the squad car which had visited the crash scene in Chelsea.

"Yes, I picked up the hat – it was in the road near the Lancia. I had a look at it, and thought—"

"Sure it was near the Lancia?"

"Quite sure, sir."

"Thanks," said Roger. "What about that Chrysler?"

"No serious damage, it'll be ready by midday. Where shall we send it?"

"Tell you later," Roger said. He replaced the receiver and picked up the hat. There wasn't a chance of finding fingerprints on it, and he turned it upside down. The inside was stained, as with sweat, and the thin leather headband was nearly black. He rang for a sergeant and told him to take it to the laboratory and have it checked for hairs or traces of brilliantine. All the time, he thought of Francesca Liddel.

He found the report from Maybury Crescent. There was no change in Mrs Liddel's condition. There was none in Peel's, either. Fifteen minutes later, after he had looked through various reports on other cases, the sergeant came back with the hat and a small envelope.

"Hairs?" asked Roger sharply.

"Jet black, sir, and five of them. We've had 'em under the lenses. Youngish man, judging from the condition of the hair. We've scraped the leather band, and the stuff's being analysed to see if we can find out what he used for oiling his hair – don't think there's much chance of identifying the proprietary brand, most of those things have the same base."

"Well, it's worth trying," Roger said. The sergeant went out, and Roger lifted the telephone. In two minutes he was speaking to the matron of the nursing home where Liddel was staying.

"Oh, Mr Liddel left just after nine o'clock, sir." The matron was emphatic and sounded indignant. "He was most *rude,* although I'm sure that we did

everything we could to help him."

"Was he fit to leave?"

"He'll be foolish if he overdoes anything, Mr West."

"Yes. Did he have a letter or any message this morning?"

"Not to my knowledge, and I would have known if he had."

"Thanks very much," said Roger, "you've been very helpful."

He put down the receiver, picked up the hat, and squinted at it. It was as dilapidated a specimen as he was likely to come across; a pride only to a tramp. He went out, carrying the hat. Ten minutes later he pulled up in Hillcourt Mews. No one was about. He went to the front door of Liddel's flat, and rang the bell. There was a movement inside; but the door wasn't opened immediately. The movements continued; he thought he heard a whisper of voices, and rang again.

Anthony Liddel opened the door.

"What the devil—oh, it's you." He had a bandage on, turban fashion, and looked pale; but he hadn't lost the rakish look. "I might have known it, I don't want to talk to any more policemen, I'm sick of policemen."

"That probably runs in the family," Roger said.

"Meaning what?" Liddel's voice rose.

"Whatever you like to think I mean, but I was thinking of your father. He's still in a bad spot—remember?" Roger went in. Liddel shrugged and stood aside, then closed the door. The other doors in the flat were closed, except one which was ajar. Liddel moved across to it and pushed it open. It was the dining room.

"Well, what do you want?" Liddel was abrupt.

"I thought I'd welcome you home," Roger said.

"You might spend five minutes looking for my sister."

"She might spare the time to call me."

"Don't be a fool!"

"About what?"

"How can she call you? She's been kidnapped."

"So now you believe everything you read in the newspapers," Roger said. He twirled the battered trilby round on his forefinger, and Liddel was compelled to look at it. He stopped twirling, and held it out. "Recognise this?"

"No."

"Look again."

Liddel frowned, and studied the hat.

"I've seldom seen worse," he said.

"You've seen it before."

"I don't remember you wearing it." The sarcasm missed fire, for Liddel seemed genuinely puzzled.

Roger took off his own hat and put on the old one. He turned round slowly, as a mannequin on show. When he was facing Liddel again, the man said slowly: "I can't swear to it, but it's very much like the hat that my assailant wore. I only caught a glimpse of it."

"Probably the same one," Roger said.

"So—you've caught him!" Liddel gripped his arm. "Who is he? Have you found Frankie?" His voice was taut.

"No."

"If you've caught the man—"

"We've caught the hat, and that's a start," Roger said. "While I'm here, what about changing your mind and telling the truth for a change? What documents did the owner of this hat come for?"

"Oh, *that* old story."

"Your sister's story."

"She saw you were a romantic, and gave you something to feast on," Liddel said.

Roger laughed. "You're a hard nut, but I'll crack you. Cigar?" He slipped a box of ten Ramonez from his pocket, opened it, and held it out. Five nearly black cigars poked out of one end, the grinning face of the man on the box turned towards Liddel. He watched the man closely, and saw surprise, perhaps, but no sign of recognition, nothing to suggest that the picture or the cigars were familiar.

"I don't smoke cigars until the evening, and seldom then," Liddel said. "What are you getting at, West?"

"The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth," Roger said easily. He put the cigars away and took out cigarettes. "Who's your visitor?"

Liddel started.

"Eh?"

"Who's here with you, trying to hide from me?"

"Oh, don't be a fool!" Liddel tried to sound indignant, and succeeded only in sounding peeved. "I arrived half an hour or so ago, and haven't seen a soul."

"I don't believe you."

Liddel said harshly: "One day you'll go too far."

"Perhaps there are some things you don't know. Your cousin was murdered, your father is under arrest, your sister put up a mysterious act and then ducked—"

"She was kidnapped!"

"Or she was kidnapped, which isn't likely. You were attacked for the sake of papers which you try to pretend don't exist. Added up, that's a pretty total, but there are two other things." Roger's voice hardened. Liddel tried to look away, but Roger's eyes seemed to hold his with a kind of magnetism. "The first thing isn't so important – I was shot at, last night, and I don't like being shot at. The second really matters. A friend of mine on the Force was attacked and may die. I'm not going to use kid gloves any more. Who are you hiding in this flat?"

Liddel didn't answer.

Roger moved towards the door.

It opened, and Al Maloney came in, with an amiable grin and a wave of the hand.

“Looking for me?” he asked.

11

NEWS FROM AMERICA

"So it's you." Roger looked at the American distastefully. "The next time you need first aid, my wife will probably dispense it with a poker."

"That so?"

"It ought to be so. What made you think that Liddel could help you find his sister more easily than I could?"

"That was just a guess," Maloney drawled.

"I doubt it."

"You'd doubt anything," Liddel said.

"Does that surprise you? Why try to keep Maloney away from me? Why lie about him being here?"

"My visitors are my business."Not now," said Roger. "Your visitors and everything you do are police business. We have that way with suspects."

"What do you suspect me of?"

"Complicity in murder, and it spreads to your accomplices, whatever their nationality," Roger said. "Why come here, Mr Maloney?"

"Just for a talk with Frankie's brother," Maloney said. "I came to the conclusion that you weren't so hot. Maybe Tony and I can get results quicker than you, and that's why I'm in England – for results."

"Be careful you don't find the inside of an English jail," Roger said.

He turned on his heel and went out, and was at the front door before either of the others spoke. In his car, he put the hat on the seat beside him, and began to whistle again.

Back at the Yard, he called for the Inspector who was in charge of the quest for customers of Ramonez cigars, then telephoned to have the Chrysler taken to Liddel's flat.

The Inspector, big, burly, and florid-faced, was named Sweeney. He was surly as well as burly, but a sticker at any job, and had extremely neat handwriting; he preferred his handwriting to the typist's work, and presented Roger with a long list of names and addresses; there were three pages in all.

"These all smoke Ramonez cigars," he said in a hoarse voice; he sounded as if he had a plum in his mouth.

"Fine. Any more to come?"

"Bound to be a few."

"We'll start on these," said Roger, scanning the list. Besides the names of the smokers there were the names of the tobacconists who supplied the cigars. "We'll try the tobacconists first."

"With what?" asked Sweeney.

"That hat." Roger pointed. "We want a customer who usually wears that hat."

Sweeney shrugged.

The hat was recognised by the twenty-seventh tobacconist they visited. The shopkeeper did not know the name or address of his customer, but for two or three months a man had come in once a fortnight for fifty cigars. He always came on the same day: a Friday. Today was Thursday. He hadn't been last week, so he was due tomorrow.

Roger's whistling was gayer as he drove back to the Yard with Sweeney and a Detective Officer.

Evans greeted him, in his office; and looked more satisfied than at any time since the beginning of the hunt.

"Now what?" asked Roger, sinking into his chair. "Good news?

"Peel's okay."

"Sure?" Roger's heart lifted.

"Out of danger," said Evans. "He'll be receiving visitors tomorrow. I've told his wife. Chatty's as pleased as a dog with two tails."

Roger said explosively: "Wonderful! When can he talk?"

"Fairly soon – we've a man with him."

"Anything else?" asked Roger.

"Not much," said Evans, as if that were all the news anyone had a right to expect. "There's a cable from New York. Maloney left on that 'plane all right. He's a rancher from Texas, owns the Lord knows how many cows, and couldn't be much richer. He's also a bit of a playboy, and spends a month or two each year in New York and Miami."

"Married?"

*'No. Aged thirty-six."

"Relatives?" Roger asked abruptly.

"Orphan," said Evans. "Those New York police know their job. He worked up from practically nothing – struck gold when he was in his late teens, and had a good head for business. I asked them if they could say where he met Francesca Liddel."

"Can they?"

"No. But they were seen together quite a lot at the Waldorf-Astoria and a few other high spots in New York. That reminds me, Handsome, we've never inquired what Francesca Liddel was doing in America, have we?"

"No."

"Might try that line," said Evans.

"You have a shot, will you?"

"Suits me," said Evans. "Oh, I knew there was something else. Bill Sloan telephoned. He's cutting his holiday short. He doesn't say whether it's because he's run out of Swiss francs or because he's anxious to help in this job, but he'll be back tomorrow. Your friend Lessing telephoned, too. He said you'd find him at Bell Street, any time after six tonight."

Roger grinned. "Things are looking up." He told Evans about the cigar smoker and the hat, and Evans was almost excited.

"We'll get there soon," he said.

"We'll get there," Roger said, more cautiously.

It was nearly eight o'clock when he reached Bell Street. Someone in the front room was playing the piano; and that meant that Mark Lessing had been as good as his word. Few amateurs could play the piano as well as he. Roger let himself in. There was a light on in the kitchen, so Janet was there. He went along, and found her grilling some cod steaks. She pushed him out, saying that supper would be ready in ten minutes. He stood and watched her, cheeks flushed from the grill, small plastic apron tied round her waist; he smiled contentedly, and went upstairs. The boys, asleep in their separate rooms, had the look of angels. He washed and went downstairs. Mark Lessing was still playing, and Janet called out: "Two minutes, tell Mark."

Roger went into the front room. The baby grand piano was in a corner. Lessing sat, long hair over his forehead, lean body slumping forward. Roger let him finish a Liszt rhapsody, then clapped his hands noisily.

Mark didn't turn round.

"Infidel," he said, in a deep voice. He smoothed down his hair, and strummed the keys again. "How are you?"

"Buoyant."

Mark looked round, smiling. He was a good-looking man, but his face had a touch of austerity; some called it arrogance. His rather sallow complexion was clear, his hair was dark – not quite black. He dressed in brown, and dressed well. As he stood up, he took out cigarettes.

"Not now, we're going to eat," said Roger. "Very glad you've made it."

"Serious trouble?"

"There's always just the chance, when people come and see me here, that someone will get the bright idea that Janet's a better target than I," said Roger. "Can you make this your headquarters for a few days?"

"I'm installed."

"Thanks."

"It's getting cold!" cried Janet.

It was almost possible to forget the case; to forget that he was a policeman. They sat for half an hour over coffee in the small dining room, after the meal, smoking, talking idly.

Mark collected china, and was also an amateur criminologist, with several slim books on criminology to his credit; good books, which were always to be found on the bookshelves of thoughtful detectives. He had a fund of stories and reminiscences, always something fresh – especially as he had recently been on the Continent for several weeks.

They had an early night, and there was no disturbance.

James Liddel, whom Roger went to see after looking through the mail on his desk, looked pale but was quite composed. He said that he had encouraged his daughter to visit the United States. She was interested in interior decorating, worked at it as a hobby, and had been eager to study the fashions in America; that was all.

Mrs Liddel, who was still in bed and looked years older than when Roger had first seen her, confirmed that statement.

Evans' report, built on various inquiries and two long telephone conversations with the New York Police, confirmed that Francesca had gone on a combined holiday and interior decorating expedition.

Roger finished his rounds by a quarter to eleven, and drove out to Hampstead.

The Smoke Shop, where a Mr White had identified the hat, was near the Underground Station. Roger parked his car around a corner, had a word with a policeman to make sure that no one got in his way if he wanted to drive off quickly, then walked towards the shop. A man was busy pasting up advertising signs on the window of a shop next door; that was the sergeant on duty with Evans. Evans himself was behind the tobacconist's counter, serving as an assistant. White, a small, bald-headed man with a bright if strained smile, was stacking cigarettes on his shelves. Roger went in for a packet of twenty Player's. Evans made no sign that he recognised him, but gave an imperceptible shake of his head. Roger strolled out, and went across the road. He had little idea what to look for, except that it was a man about his own size. Half a dozen men who might measure up to that went in and came out of the shop, each of them showing a packet of cigarettes. The sergeant finished his work at the window, and busied himself packing the signs away in his bag. He would start next door, if necessary.

Roger moved, so that he could see into the shop when traffic did not get in the way.

White had assured them that the customer seldom came in after eleven-thirty; it was now ten minutes to twelve.

A man approached the shop, and turned in; he wore a new hat, a grey trilby. It had that touch of newness which made it noticeable to anyone who was particularly interested in headgear. Roger crossed the road in a gap in the traffic. He was nearly at the opposite pavement when he saw another man approaching – the tall, supple figure of Al Maloney. Maloney wasn't smiling, and was dawdling along. He appeared to be watching *The Smoke Shop.*

Roger kept on the kerb.

He saw Evans, inside, stretch up to get something off a shelf above his head: a box of cigars.

The man with the new hat was standing with his back to Roger.

Evans had the cigars in his hand.

"These the brand you want, sir? Ramonez."

"That's right."

"I wonder if you would mind answering a question or two, sir," said Evans, whose voice always dropped to one of monotonous calm when he was excited. "I am a—"

The man with the new hat swung round and rushed towards the street.

12

NEAR MISS

Roger saw him clearly. He had dark hair and a pale face, thin lips, big brown eyes, heavy eyebrows. His nose was long and pointed, and his chin was pointed, too. He swung round almost as soon as Evans had started to speak, and moved swiftly – and his right hand dropped to his pocket. Roger darted forward, with a word to the sergeant.

Maloney cried: "West!"

Only a couple of feet away, he took a few steps and blocked Roger's path. The man with the new hat swung right – into the sergeant. Some sixth sense seemed to warn him and he kicked. He caught the sergeant in the groin, and rushed on. He didn't look round, just took to his heels.

Maloney dithered in Roger's path.

"That man—"

Roger handed him off roughly and raced after his quarry. Evans was almost level with him. Dozens of people stood and stared. The man who smoked Ramonez cigars swerved off the pavement and ran in front of a car, and reached the opposite pavement. He ran in the same direction. Roger kept running on the other side of the road, looking across, seeing his man only a few yards ahead.

Evans was shouting: "Stop, thief!" Roger waited for the first break in the stream of traffic, then raced across the road.

His quarry had taken a side turning, dodging two policemen who were hurrying towards him. None of the passers-by interfered, but a woman screamed. The man was running fast along a wide street, with blocks of flats on either side and, farther along, houses in a tall terrace. Roger pounded after him, now a long way in front of Evans – and he saw that his quarry carried a gun.

Someone else was running after Roger, and keeping fairly close.

The fugitive turned into the second block of flats. A name was painted over the front door: 'Bingham Mansions'. Roger reached the entrance – and a shot rang out, sounding loud. A bullet passed him, and he heard it hit against the pavement on the other side of the road. He dodged to one side, but approached the front entrance, keeping close to the wall. He heard a whining sound: a lift in motion. He peered round the entrance, hat in hand, and caught a glimpse of the dark-haired man by the lift, with gun pointing towards the door.

A man drew up behind Roger.

"I told you you ought to tote a gun."

Roger said: "Give me yours."

"Not in a thousand years!" Maloney peered round the entrance – and the man by the lift fired. Maloney drew back, then poked the gun round and

pulled the trigger; blind shooting. There was a thud inside, as the bullet hit the wall. The whining stopped.

Roger snatched the gun out of Maloney's hand, and went forward. He saw the fugitive stepping into the lift, backwards. He swayed to one side, but the man didn't shoot again. The lift doors closed and the lift began to rise. Roger went in and raced up the stairs. He could hear the lift moving, and would know when it stopped. It was a floor ahead of him when the noise ceased and the gates clanged open. He reached the landing in time to see his quarry disappearing into one of the flats; the door banged.

Someone else was running up the stairs: Maloney.

The flat was Number 17.

Roger reached it and knocked with his fist.

"Open up! Open in the name of the law!"

Maloney came up, panting.

"Save—your—breath," he gasped.

Roger drew back, pointed the gun at the lock, and fired; the first bullet bit into the lock, splintering wood; the second made metal split, and Roger kicked at the door. It opened a few inches. He heard a ringing sound; his quarry was at the telephone. He motioned Maloney aside, stood back, gun in hand, and then crouched low. He whispered: "Push the door open."

Maloney, standing at his full height and to one side, leaned across and pushed the door quickly. Roger went forward, crouching. He caught a glimpse of his quarry standing by the telephone, gun in his hand, telephone at his right ear. He heard the roar of the shot, but the bullet went over his head. He fired. His bullet smashed into the telephone, splintering it; it fell to pieces in the man's hand. He couldn't check his rush, knew that one bullet could finish him. He heard a shout, saw the man in front of him start, then butted him in the stomach. His victim staggered back, and Maloney shouted again and came rushing in.

Roger straightened up.

Maloney was struggling with the man, holding his gun-hand above his head. It was over, bar shouting. Roger stretched up and wrenched the gun away. As he stood back, he said: "Take it easy, Maloney."

That was a waste of words. Maloney broke away, then hit the dazed prisoner. The crack of the blow sounded loud, all Maloney's strength was behind it. The man with black hair sagged, and his head jerked back. Maloney hit him again with the same savage strength, and he toppled over. That wasn't sufficient. Maloney went at him like a wild cat, clawing at his throat, getting his fingers round the slim neck. Roger could see only Maloney's profile; but his lips were twisted and his eyes were glaring, there was death in his hands and in his mind.

Roger hit the American on the nape of the neck, with the butt of his gun. Maloney gasped, and his hold slackened. Roger pushed him away, as Evans and the sergeant came in.

"Got him!" cried Evans.

"It ought to help," Roger said.

The prisoner's name, according to the papers he carried in his pocket and the information of the porter at the flats, was Kane – Louis Kane. He looked young, somewhere in the late twenties. He was still unconscious, and lying on the floor in the front room of the flat. Maloney, coming round, was in a chair.

Kane's face had a vicious look, even when in forced repose. His clothes were cheap and threadbare; that matched the old hat, but not this flat, which must have cost three hundred pounds a year at least. Everything had been taken from his pockets and was now placed neatly on a long, narrow table which stood against one wall. Evans and the sergeant were already looking through the other rooms. A policeman stood on duty outside. The porter had been dismissed, and Roger was alone in this outer room, with the two unconscious men. There was no other telephone here, but he had sent a message to the Yard. Others would soon be here to start a comprehensive search of the flat.

Maloney opened his eyes first.

He blinked, licked his lips, caught sight of Roger and gave a grin; not much of a grin, but it showed spirit. "Howdo," he croaked.

Roger said, "You're under arrest."

Maloney grinned more broadly, and struggled to sit up. Kane didn't move.

"How come?" Maloney said. "Didn't I save your life?"

"You nearly saved him from arrest."

"I don't know a thing about English law," said Maloney. "I'll have to get me an attorney." He was bright; so bright that Roger doubted whether he had been unconscious for long.

"The charge is obstructing the police," Roger said. "And when we've got you in a cell, we can start questioning you, Al. You won't be so smart afterwards."

"That's what I get for trying to help you," Maloney said. His grin wasn't so cocksure.

Evans appeared at a doorway.

"Can you spare a minute, Handsome?"

"If you stay here, yes. What is it?"

"Go and have a look for yourself," said Evans. He stood aside, and Roger went into the next room. It was one of four others, a narrow, charming room, delightfully furnished; this was a woman's room. Another led off it, and the sergeant was in there. Roger went across, and looked into a bedroom; a woman's bedroom. On the dressing-table, of figured walnut, was a photograph of James Liddel.

He went across and picked it up. The photograph was signed: "For my beloved daughter, Francesca."

There were other photographs which he recognised; probably more of Mrs Liddel's work. Also, there were books with Francesca's name written on the flyleaf, several other indications that this was her flat, including clothes with her name on them.

He went back to the front room, where Evans was now talking with two Yard men who had just arrived.

"See what I mean?" he asked Roger.

"Yes. No sign that she's been here lately, though."

"No," said Evans. "The man's been using another room, and living in the kitchen."

Roger nodded, and went downstairs. The porter told him that it was Miss Liddel's and that the man had her permission to use it. Did that mean she had recognised the man who had attacked her and her brother, but failed to say so?

Kane was still unconscious. Roger took a closer look at him, and saw the scratches which Maloney's fingers had made on his cheeks, and the red, puffy swelling at his throat; given another sixty seconds, Maloney would have killed the man. Had he deliberately tried to kill him? Had he feigned that overwhelming surge of rage, but actually tried, coldly and callously, to squeeze the life out of Louis Kane?

If he had, it could only have been to prevent Kane from talking.

Roger felt Kane's pulse; it was beating.

Maloney said: "I didn't kill him."

"Not for want of trying," said Roger. "Take this man to Cannon Row, Evans, will you? I'll see him as soon as I can get over there. Charge – obstructing the police in the course of their duty." He didn't look at Maloney, but waited for a protest.

There was none.

Maloney walked out, without assistance, but he was biting his lips as if he were in pain. He'd done much more with his injured shoulder than he should have, and wasn't likely to be feeling comfortable. But in spite of the grimaces of pain, there was a glint in his eyes – almost one of satisfaction.

Kane was still unconscious.

"Better get a doctor," Roger said to one of the Yard men. "Have a police surgeon from the Division." He turned to the collection of oddments taken out of Kane's pockets. There was nothing remarkable about them. An old pigskin wallet, good quality but almost worn out. There were keys, a lighter, two boxes of matches, a cigar piercer, some loose change, a pen knife, a small cardboard box containing a dozen cartridges for the Smith-Wesson. There was a ten-size box of Ramonez cigars, with only three left in it, a gunmetal watch, two combs, one with the teeth missing, the stubs of two pencils, and a ball-type pen. Except for the keys, nothing here was likely to prove helpful.

Roger opened the wallet. A few stamps, three pound notes, a registration card – Kane's – a driving licence, and a photograph of Francesca Liddel made up the contents.

It was one which had been taken some years ago. It was creased at the corners, as if it had been carried in Kane's pockets for some time. There was no writing on the back; no notes on any of the papers, nothing to suggest where Francesca might be. She hadn't always avoided being photographed.

Unless there was something in the flat, or unless Kane talked, he was no nearer finding Francesca.

Roger went into the kitchen and looked round. Stacks of unwashed crockery were on the draining-board, the tablecloth was stained and dirty. Kane had pigged it here alone, using fresh crockery as he had gone along. There was a fusty smell, coming from old tins, some of them coated with verdigris, which littered the floor beneath the sink. Tea leaves overflowed a sink-tidy.

A man called out from the front room.

“Mr West! He’s coming round.”

13

SILENT KANE

The doctor, Maltby, was squatting on a corner of a table, looking at Kane, one eye half closed, his ugly face set, and his lips pursed.

"Happened to be at the station," he said, as Roger went in.

Kane was licking his lips, and looking dazedly at the ceiling. He swallowed and gasped, then his right hand strayed to his neck, and he fingered it gingerly. He grunted again, and closed his eyes. Next time he opened them, the dazed look had gone.

"Brandy?" asked Maltby.

"Just a spot," Roger said.

The doctor filled the cap of a brandy flask and held it to Kane's lips. Kane sipped and drank; swallowing obviously hurt him; talking would also hurt. He was now sitting in an easy chair, with a cushion behind his head.

Roger said: "The game's up, Kane. Where's Miss Liddel?"

Kane looked at him, blankly.

"We know you're all right, and you can't hold out any longer. Where is she?"

Kane didn't speak.

"You're only wasting your own time and ours," Roger said. "Tell us where we can find her."

Kane drew in a deep breath.

"How should I know?"

"You know all right, you took her away."

"Forget it," said Kane. Talking obviously hurt him, and his voice was a husky whisper. But the dazed look was quite gone, a cunning one replaced it.

Roger said: "You might find yourself strung up if you hold out on us."

Kane said: "That would be too bad," and lapsed into silence. He refused to speak again, did not once open his mouth, at the flat, on the way to Cannon Row, the police station nearest the Yard, or when he was in the cell.

Immediately after lunch Chatworth came along to Roger's office and dropped on to an upright chair, which he overflowed; he never looked comfortable except in his own capacious chair. His florid face was flushed, and his bald patch shinier; he had obviously lunched well.

"Has Kane talked?" he asked abruptly.

"No, and I don't think he will."

"What have you found out about him?"

"Probably all there is to know," said Roger, picking up reports. "Ex-Army, obviously a good education, family background not known, mixed with the wrong fast set, and started to live by his wits. The war gave him a few years

of prosperity, but he was trained for nothing when he came out. He started several jobs, and was flung out of them all. Lately, he's been on the fringe of one of the West End mobs, a kind of contact man. He hasn't been inside, and we've never had tabs on him, but he's known to several of our men. They've marked him down as a possible bad man. The gun's a war relic of course, and we don't know where he got his ammunition from, but that's fairly easy to come by. He's no family, no ties, and until three months ago, he was living in a dosshouse. He took over this flat a week after Francesca Liddel left for America."

"Do you know how he fixed that?"

"No – from the time he moved in, he's been a mystery," said Roger. "But Francesca knew him and must have recognised him as her assailant. I'd like to know why she said she didn't. He started to have money about the time he moved in – not much, but more than he's been used to. We can't find a bank account, but he had a hundred pounds in notes, hidden under the mattress in his bedroom. We're trying to trace them, but they're all one-pounds, and I doubt if we'll have much luck. According to the porter at the flat, he had no visitors; which simply means that no one came to see him – until this morning."

"Who went then?"

"Maloney."

Chatworth nodded expectantly.

"The porter sent Maloney up, and a cleaner in the passage heard a quarrel. Maloney was there about twenty minutes, and hung about outside afterwards. He followed Kane when Kane started out for his cigars. The things we can be sure about are pretty simple – Kane's being paid to do what he is doing. He's a desperate type, and doesn't care what he does. He was paid to go to Liddel's flat, paid to see Francesca Liddel at Barnes, paid to attack me – or Maloney. I don't think he has any other motive, so we haven't got very far."

Chatworth sniffed, and Roger smiled faintly.

"Well, we're part of the way. We now know that Kane was able to persuade Francesca to meet him at Barnes. We also know that either Anthony Liddel or Maloney knew where he lived – and the probability is that Anthony Liddel told Maloney. Which suggests that Kane may have some kind of hold – blackmail – over the younger Liddels. Remembering that Lancelot Hay was a blackmailer; it half suggests that Hay knew more than we realised, and that Kane picked up some of the dirt. Hay worked on James Liddel, Kane may have worked on the son and daughter. Something was strong enough to make Francesca let him use her flat, in her absence; strong enough to prevent them both from telling us about him. I'm pretty sure that they knew who he was when he attacked them at the flat – and still they wouldn't name him. So, they're scared of what he might tell about them."

"And what could that be?" asked Chatworth, in a purring voice.

Roger shrugged. "At a guess, it could mean that Anthony knows the real truth about his cousin Lancelot's death. That Francesca knows something

about it – at second hand. That Kane also knows, and is blackmailing them because he can give Anthony Liddel away as the real murderer. Incidentally, that would hand out a motive we haven't thought much about, sir."

"Motive for what?"

"Lancelot Hay's murder. Because he was blackmailing his uncle, we've assumed that James Liddel was the only one with a motive. But if Anthony knew what was happening, Anthony might have killed Lancelot, simply to save his father from persecution."

Chatworth pulled at his lower lip.

"Serious?"

"Perfectly."

"And the son who will make such a sacrifice for his father lets the same father hang."

"He will probably wait until the last moment, hoping that his father will get off. I warned you this was a guessing game."

"The sister?"

"She could have come back, been taken into her brother's confidence, and become party to it all."

"Not forgetting anything, are you?" Chatworth was gruff.

"That Kane had a hold on Francesca three months ago, or he couldn't have got her to let him use the flat," Roger said. "No, I haven't forgotten that. It just doesn't fit in."

"Not satisfying," Chatworth said. "None of it is."

"This build up leaves out one unknown factor – the wealthy Al Maloney," Roger pointed out. "He could be all he's claimed to be. It's possible that Anthony Liddel took a chance, confided in him, or just told him that Kane was responsible for Francesca's disappearance. That could be enough to make Maloney go rushing to Hampstead. I don't know, sir, but I do know we'd have caught Kane earlier, if Maloney hadn't interrupted. I also know that Maloney tried to kill Kane."

Chatworth rumbled unintelligibly.

"I'd rather back the first theory – that Kane is being employed by someone, as yet unknown, who still holds Francesca," Roger said.

"Needle in the haystack again," Chatworth said. "But the haystack's no bigger than the one you found Kane in." He hoisted himself to his feet. "I hear Sloan's coming back."

"He'll be here this afternoon."

"Use him for this job," said Chatworth, briefly. "By the way, Peel can see visitors, and by tomorrow morning he'll be able to talk. He might have overheard a lot of the conversation. See him yourself, won't you?"

"As soon as I'm allowed to," said Roger, emphatically.

"Have you talked to Maloney yet?"

"I'm just going across to Cannon Row."

Chatworth fingered his chin.

"Don't forget that Maloney's an American citizen, and if he thought he had a grievance, it would be played high by the press both sides of the

Atlantic."

"I won't, sir," Roger promised.

He walked along the passages to the steps of the Civil Police building at the Yard. This was nearer Parliament Street. He stood on the steps, looking at the grey buildings, the grey paved Yard, the iron gates with the policemen on duty at either side. Cannon Row police station, squat and darkly grey, was in a corner; it looked like part of Scotland Yard, was actually a Divisional police station. He walked briskly across to it.

Maloney was in a comfortable cell. He had an armchair, a small table, books, and magazines. He was sitting forward in the armchair, reading, and smoking. The bars which fronted the cell were wide spaced, and he looked up as Roger and a sergeant, with the keys, appeared. He grinned and put his magazine down, but didn't get up as Roger entered. He looked pale, and his eyes were rather glassy; he'd had a lot of pain from that shoulder.

"Say, West, you could let me have some American magazines; I can't read English."

"It's the same English we use in the newspapers that you can read," Roger said dryly. "When Anthony Liddel told you about Kane, why didn't you tell me instead of going and threatening to cut his throat?"

Maloney shook his head.

"You went there straight from Liddel's flat. You were heard quarrelling. You waited outside and followed him to the tobacconist's. There, you tried to stop me from arresting him. Later, you tried to squeeze the life out of him. You can't get away from facts."

Maloney's voice was more gentle and drawling.

"I didn't try to stop you, I just got in your way. As I tried to get out of it, I wrenched my arm."

"Maybe." It was plausible. "The other things are facts you can't evade."

"You bet I can't, and you bet I don't want to. That heel manhandled Francesca. I guess I lost my head and tried to make him pay for it. But you can't hang a man for losing his temper."

"You can jail him for causing grievous bodily harm."

"So that's your phrase," marvelled Maloney. "Well, try it. I've decided to give you three more hours. After that, I shall ask for an attorney from the embassy – and you can bet your sweet life, I'll get one. If you want to make an international incident, hold me for three hours and one minute." His grin was broader than ever, he looked as if he were enjoying himself.

"I can't think of a better way of making sure that I hold you," Roger said dryly.

He went off, leaving Maloney looking less sure of himself. But it hadn't really helped. Maloney hadn't admitted that Anthony Liddel had told him where to find Kane. He could guess as much as he liked, and still not be sure. It might be worthwhile seeing Anthony again. He decided to leave it; a night of suspense would probably break down the man's resistance.

He made sure that inquiries were being made about Kane, and then drove to Brixton Jail again.

James Liddel was playing patience, and he stood up as Roger entered, leaving the cards out on the table, placing the rest of the pack neatly on one corner.

"Two visits in so short a time, Mr West?"

Roger sat down and offered cigarettes.

"Mr Liddel, there are two questions I've never asked you before. They're very important. I don't need to tell you that if the evidence weren't overwhelming, you wouldn't be here."

Liddel said: "That is right."

"The first question – if you persist in your plea of not guilty—"

"I most certainly do."

"Then whom are you shielding?"

Liddel smiled faintly. He seemed more rested than at the time of his arrest, and more imposing and handsome.

"No one, Mr West."

"If you are shielding someone unknown, it might mean your death – and your shame."

"No one, Mr West."

Roger said: "Very well. Do you know a man named Kane?"

Liddel frowned, mildly.

"Kane—Kane? I recall it somewhere—but surely, Citizen Kane. It was the name of a man in a most remarkable film. I seldom visit the cinema, but was persuaded to see that and was always glad of it. I don't know anyone else named Kane."

Roger said: "Maloney?"

Liddel started so violently that he knocked the playing cards off the corner of the table.

14

FAMILY FRIEND?

In all their interviews the name of Maloney was the first thing which had upset Liddel's poise. He leaned forward, to pick up the cards, obviously because he wanted to cover his confusion. When he straightened up, all his colour had gone, and his calm had gone with it. He moistened his lips, and looked away from Roger, placing the cards back on the corner with meticulous care.

Roger said slowly: "What do you know of Al Maloney?"

"I can tell you nothing that will assist you," Liddel said.

"I'm trying to save you from hanging."

"I thought your task was to get me hanged."

"My task is to get you justice."

"My lawyers will ensure that, Mr West."

"They aren't likely to, if you keep information from them."

Liddel stood up, with something of his daughter's grace of movement. He had recovered himself quickly, and his voice was steadier.

"I would much prefer to have my legal adviser present at these discussions, Mr West, and in any case, with or without him, there is nothing I can say that I haven't said already."

Roger turned to the door, touched the handle, hesitated, and then said slowly: "It's a big thing to die for someone else, Mr Liddel."

Liddel made no reply.

A maid, the one whom Roger had seen on the night when he had arrested Liddel, opened the door of n Maybury Crescent, when Roger called there. The light was on behind her, and she recognised Roger at once, and stood aside.

"Good evening, sir."

"How is Mrs Liddel tonight?"

"Oh, she is much improved," said the maid eagerly. "She's actually in the drawing-room, sir, the first time she has been downstairs since—since it happened." The maid looked happier. "She's there now, with the nurse, and I'm sure she will see you."

"Tell her I won't keep her many minutes," Roger said.

The maid disappeared, leaving him in the hall. He remembered every detail of it. The atmosphere of prosperity and of culture was very clear. The Liddels had everything that money and breeding, education, and society, could give them. There was a hush, everywhere; and it was broken only gently when the door through which the maid had gone opened again. She closed it as she came across the hall.

"Mrs Liddel will see you, sir."

"Thanks." Roger followed her. The absurd formality of opening and closing the door, then opening it again to announce him, seemed exactly right here. The years could pass and manners change, but with the Liddels much remained unaltered.

The drawing-room was large, with two chandeliers; a Bechstein grand; wine-red and dove-grey furnishings, concealed wall light, and other lights over the water-colours, each one exquisite. Mrs Liddel and the nurse were sitting near the fireplace; a log fire burned.

Roger was surprised; even astonished.

Mrs Liddel was as calm and composed as her husband. She had made-up, was distinguished – handsome was the better word. In her youth she had been beautiful, and she was ageing with rare grace. She was hardly the same woman as he had seen on the night of the arrest, or on his last visit. Her despair had gone, there was a kind of serenity in her eyes. Could it be due to rest or to medicines? Could anything like that explain the incredible change?

This was the woman whom Francesca had feared would kill herself.

She did not stand up, and did not offer her hand.

"Good evening, Mr West. Please sit down."

"Thank you."

"You have no objection to my nurse being present, I trust?"

"None at all."

Cards were obviously a regular part of the Liddels' life. Mrs Liddel and the nurse had been playing piquet; the board was on a card table between them, with the little pegs standing up. By their side was another table, on which was a decanter and two glasses. He had not thought it likely that Mrs Liddel would unbend sufficiently to drink sherry with her nurse.

The nurse –her name was James – was a youngish, educated woman; one of the best women officers on the staff of the Yard.

"I hope you bring me good news," said Mrs Liddel, in the same old-worldly way as her husband.

"I wanted to ask you one or two questions which may help Mr Liddel," Roger said quietly. He hesitated, over the first, 'shielding' question; and dropped it. "Have you ever met a man named Kane – Louis Kane?"

She said: "Not that I recall, Mr West."

"He's a young man, with very dark hair, rather thin features." Roger took out a photograph and held it out. "Not a man you could easily forget, although he might have used a different name."

She studied the photograph, and handed it back.

"I have never seen him."

"Thank you. Have you ever heard of a man named Maloney? An American?"

The transformation was as remarkable here as with her husband. The serenity was stripped from her eyes, something like terror replaced it.

Terror? Or hatred?

Mrs Liddel gripped the arms of her chair tightly, and closed her eyes; as if

she knew that they were betraying secrets she was determined to hold to herself. She didn't speak. The nurse went to her, resting a hand on her shoulder. Only the gentle crackling of the burning logs broke the silence.

"A long time ago, Mr West, I knew a Mr Maloney," Mrs Liddel said at last. "He was a family friend." She paused. "Why do you ask?"

"Have you seen or heard from him lately?"

"No."

"How long ago was it, Mrs Liddel?"

"Many years ago. He went to live in America."

"How old would he be today?"

"How old?" She had recovered her composure completely, now. "It's hard to say. Fifty-five perhaps, about that, I should think."

That meant that the younger Al Maloney might be the son.

Mrs Liddel told him nothing more.

Roger waited at the Yard for half an hour, before telephoning the Maybury Crescent house and asking for Nurse James. The nurse sounded breathless as she spoke.

"Yes, who is it?"

"Chief Inspector West."

"I was hoping you would call, sir." Nurse James still sounded breathless. "Mrs Liddel collapsed after you'd gone, and I had to send for the doctor. She is in bed again, and quite prostrate. She hasn't moved or spoken since she collapsed, and I think she is seriously ill."

"She showed no reaction at all except what I saw?"

"No, but there's one thing you should know, sir. I have looked through her desk and writing-table, and found two letters signed by 'Al Maloney'. They were on different paper from what we usually use, and I thought at the time they were from America. They're not dated."

"To Mrs Liddel?" Roger asked sharply.

"Yes."

"How are the letters written?"

"In quite a different way – as from one family to another," said Nurse James. "The handwriting is sprawling, and I would have thought it was that of an elderly man. The paper is that of the Hotel Commodore, New York."

"Get me those letters. I'll have a man sent over to fetch them," Roger said. "Yes, at once. And keep your eyes open for the name Kane or Maloney."

"I'll do everything I can. There's one thing – I found a receipt, nearly three years old, from Stimson's Agency. She paid them a hundred pounds. It doesn't say what for – just for services rendered."

"Fine," said Roger. "That may be useful."

Nurse James rang off, and Roger went across to Cannon Row, puzzling over the service which a private detective agency had rendered for Mrs Liddel.

Maloney was not so affable. The three hours were up, he had not yet been released, and obviously he hadn't yet brought himself to making a protest to

the American Embassy. Roger had with him a typewritten version of everything Maloney had said. He handed it to the American.

"If you agree to that, sign it as an official statement, will you? Then you can go."

Relief tempered Maloney's sarcasm.

"So you really believe I can read!" He scanned the document, and held out his hand for a pen. He signed it quickly, tossed it aside, and jumped up. "I'm on my way."

"I've a few more formalities yet, but they won't take long." Roger picked up the statement. "Where are you going to stay tonight?"

"At Anthony Liddel's flat."

"All right." Roger nodded curtly, and went out.

It was not until he was beyond Maloney's sight that he studied the signature. 'Al Maloney' was scrawled across the foot in a way which might have led some people to think that it was an older man's signature.

Roger went slowly across to the Yard. Two cars drew up, but neither of the drivers had the letter from Nurse James. It wasn't on his desk when he reached the office. He waited, impatiently, studying the signature closely, recalling the careless way in which it had been scribbled. Then footsteps approached the door, and he called "come in" as soon as the man outside tapped.

It wasn't the messenger; it was Detective Inspector William Sloan, tall, blond, rugged – and Roger's chief *aide* at the Yard.

Roger was halfway through a summary of the case when another caller arrived; the messenger. Roger ripped open the envelope and took out the letter. But he did not need to look at the signature to compare the writing. This was a scrawl, large, wavering handwriting, quite different from this Al Maloney's signature. He didn't think he would need expert opinion to convince anyone that two separate people called themselves Al Maloney.

The letter itself was rambling, friendly, a recital of personal affairs, with an occasional reference to the passing years; it was almost wistful.

That was all.

15

THE SECOND ‘NEEDLE’

Eddie Day looked up as Roger and Sloan entered, and dropped a watchmaker’s glass from his eye.

“Hallo, Handsome. What-ho, Sloane – had a good time in Switzerland?”

“Fine, thanks.” Sloan was very bronzed.

“Nice place – I had a week there, before the war. Very pretty. You could get plenty of francs for your pound, then, it wasn’t expensive like it is today. Go to Lucerne? I remember—”

“Sorry, Eddie,” said Roger, “but I’m worried about this handwriting, and you’re the only man who can put me right.”

That was the time-honoured way of winning Eddie’s complete co-operation; he responded to flattery with pathetic regularity.

“Well, I’ll try,” he said modestly. “What is it?”

“Have a look at these,” said Roger, and handed over the letter taken from Mrs Liddel’s and the statement which Maloney had signed. One would have expected Eddie to make some impulsive comment; he was impulsive in everything except his own work; in that, he was painfully cautious. He examined the signatures through several different glasses, took them to a special light and switched it on, his pointed nose almost touching the paper, as he scrutinised them. He breathed noisily, through his mouth, and the light glinted on a gold-topped tooth.

Roger drew Sloan over to a window.

“We can’t hurry him. Chatty says that you can come on this job with me. Care to?”

Sloan grinned; he had good teeth, and a boyish look, and he had fooled many old lags by his air of innocence.

“Why do you think I came back?”

Roger chuckled. “I had half an idea. You’ve heard most of what’s brewing, and the AC talks of it as a case of needles in haystacks. The first needle was Kane. The second is Francesca. There might be a word, any time – tonight, tomorrow about that Lancia Kane drove. Ready for an all-night session?”

“Then when we’ve heard what Eddie has to say, I’ll go home for a few hours. You can call me out if anything turns up.”

Sloan nodded.

Eddie switched off the bright light, and came towards them frowning, serious, over-earnest. He handed both papers to Roger.

“Different people,” he announced. “The letter was written by a man of sixty or so, no doubt about that. The signature’s that of a younger man. Can’t be any doubt about it, Roger – two different people with the same name, that’s what you’ve found. Bad luck.”

"It could be good," said Roger. "Thanks, Eddie. You may have to swear to this."

"Don't you worry," said Eddie Day.

No new reports of interest had come by next morning. A request to New York for information about the older Maloney might yield results, but wasn't likely; there was the Hotel Commodore notepaper of the letter to Mrs Liddel, but no envelope, nothing which could help them to say when the letters had been posted or where the writer lived.

Roger decided to check New York.

Just after ten, Sloan came in.

"How are things?"

"Too quiet. Maloney went straight to young Liddel's flat, and neither of them moved out during the night. They were still there an hour ago." Roger tapped a report. "Kane hasn't talked. He's coming up at Bow Street, at ten o'clock; it'll be worth looking in. Sweeney is going to see the hearing through, it'll be a straight request for a remand, and there isn't likely to be anything new. Otherwise—" He shrugged. "I want to go and see Peel. Will you wait here until I get back?"

Sloan nodded.

"You might telephone Stimson's Agency, and tell them we want to know what work they did for Mrs Liddel, three years ago," Roger said.

Peel looked a sick man, but his face brightened when he saw Roger. He had already managed to dictate a brief statement, against the wishes of his nurse and doctor. It might have helped, a day or two before. He gave a description of Kane as the man who had met Francesca at the Barnes house. Francesca had arrived by taxi. He had heard them talking, and thought the man had been menacing, but had been tricked and attacked unawares. He could not say whether Francesca had gone voluntarily or been kidnapped. He'd seen no other men there. The car outside had been a Lancia. He wanted to hear of the progress to date; Roger told him a little, and was then shooed out by the nurse.

Sloan greeted him with: "Nothing doing from Stimson's, Roger. They've changed hands in the past year, of course, and have no back records about the Liddel woman. None of the staff did work for her, and the original Stimson's dead."

"Pity," said Roger.

Sloan was in too much of a hurry to think over that.

"I'm just off to Bow Street," he said, and went out.

The telephone bell rang; it was Burnaby. Roger knew that Burnaby was on duty somewhere in the case, but forgot for the moment where he was stationed. Burnaby sounded as excited as a policeman could become.

"They're going out, sir."

"Who's going out?"

"Why, those two men—"

"Young Liddel and Maloney?"

"Yes, sir. I heard Liddel talking to the garage, which is in the mews, saying he wanted the tank filled right up and the tyres checked – said he was going on a long journey. I thought you ought to know at once."

"Wonderful! Delay them, if you can, until I come. Don't make it obvious."

"I'll try," said Burnaby dubiously.

Roger hurried out. His own car was parked in the yard. He passed it, selecting one of the radio-equipped squad cars, a Buick with a supercharged engine. As he drove off, he told the Information Room by radio what he was doing, asking them to put out a general 'watch' call for Liddel's Sunbeam Talbot or Maloney's Chrysler. He pulled up his coat collar as he drew near Hillcourt Mews.

Burnaby, bulky in dark grey, stood near the entrance, and gave a thumbs-up sign.

There were two ways from the mews; the most popular was a right turn, which gave a clear run to Oxford Street. Roger pulled up at the side of the road. He heard a car engine start up nearby, and stop again. He beckoned Burnaby.

The Detective Officer came bustling up.

"What time were you on duty?"

"Eight o'clock, sir."

"Get in, and keep out of sight," said Roger. The engine was warming up again. This time, it didn't stop, and Anthony Liddel's green Sunbeam Talbot nosed its way out of the mews and turned towards Roger's car. Roger cupped his face in his hands as it passed, as if he were lighting a cigarette. He started off immediately afterwards. Neither Maloney nor Liddel looked round; that didn't mean that they hadn't noticed him and the Buick. He let them forge ahead, but kept them in sight; the green car was so noticeable that this was easy.

They crossed Oxford Street, swung round Portman Square into Baker Street, and on up Park Road. Soon, they were in the St John's Wood area, travelling fast. So they were heading north. Roger kept the Yard informed by radio. As soon as he was on the Barnet Bypass, he flashed a request for a powerful car to be waiting for him at Baldock. Then he put his foot down hard, passed the green car without looking right or left, and shot ahead. He reached Baldock just after the new police car had arrived.

"Come on, Burnaby!"

Roger jumped out, and took the wheel of the other car, and called to the driver who had brought the new one: "Get this off the road or drive in the other direction – hurry!"

He did not see the green Talbot. There was a chance that it had taken a different turning, but police patrols would be on the lookout for it. He drove at seventy miles an hour for five minutes, then slowed down and pulled up in a village. Burnaby was sitting at the back, sizzling with eagerness.

"This ought to be big, sir."

"Could be," Roger said. "Hallo, here they come!"

He started off slowly as the Sunbeam Talbot came into the village. Neither Maloney nor Liddel gave him a second glance; there was no reason why they should, they hadn't seen this car before. If necessary, he could change it again later, but the car likely to arouse their suspicions had been the Buick.

They were now beyond St Neots, still heading north. Suddenly the Sunbeam Talbot turned off the main road. Roger didn't slow down. There was a slight hill in front of them, and Roger snapped: "See if they're moving, or just stalling."

"Right, sir." As they breasted the rise Burnaby pressed his face against the rear window; his eyes were sharp, and he said quickly: "They've stopped – they're turning round."

"Just making sure they're not being followed," Roger said. Repressed excitement came bubbling out. He used the radio, asking the Lincolnshire police to have a fast car waiting for him at The George, Stamford. Burnaby fell silent; he didn't like ninety miles an hour on any road. The next car was a new Wolseley with a fine burst of speed. Roger drove through the outskirts of Stamford, with its fine buildings of Lincolnshire stone, and turned into The George, an old coaching-inn with a wide entrance arch. He left the car, and stepped to the arch, so that he could see the road but not be seen. The green Sunbeam Talbot came along at steady speed, with Maloney now at the wheel.

Roger took the new police car from the officer in control, and drove fairly slowly through the town.

"Wonder how far they're going," Burnaby said.

"We'll just keep hoping," said Roger.

They drove through hilly land, with copses at the tops of the hills, past sheep and cattle grazing. This fell away into flat land. There was no need to fear that Maloney or Liddel had any idea that they were being followed. Now and again, the green car showed up in the sunlight; Roger kept half a mile behind.

At the top of a hill, Burnaby exclaimed: "They've stopped!"

The leading car was at a signpost; it was backed a few yards, and then turned right. Roger stepped on the accelerator, squealing to a standstill by the signpost. To the right, the sign read: Little Shepton. Stuck in the hedge was another sign, with a pointing finger, which read: Little Shepton Farm.

This road was narrow, with hedges on either side. They could see the countryside through gaps in the hedges. It was flat and uninteresting cattle country. The road twisted and turned. There had been rain in the night, and puddles and patches of mud showed where the Sunbeam Talbot had passed. They came to a sharp bend and, turning, saw a grey stone farmhouse, standing back from the road. It was half a mile away. A few fowls strutted about, from somewhere came the grunting of a pig.

The green car was pulled up outside the front door; neither of the men was in sight.

Roger switched off the engine, and they coasted down the slope.

16

THE FARMHOUSE

"So we've tracked 'em down," breathed Burnaby.

Roger stopped the car two hundred yards away from the gap in the hedge which led to the farmhouse. A sign, badly in need of painting, stuck out of a hedge. 'Little Shepton Farm – Fresh Milk – Eggs.'

"What are you going to do now?" Burnaby asked. "We're out of range of our radio, aren't we?"

"It seems like it," Roger said. The police radio outfit gave no response when he tried it. "But there was a call out, they'll know where we are, more or less."

"Just going to wait?" Waiting was the last thing Burnaby wanted.

"No. Will you go across the fields and approach from the back way? Take what cover you can. All I want is to know how many people are about."

"Suits me!"

"If you're stopped, say you've had a breakdown, and want to use a telephone. Call a garage, and make it sound genuine."

"Okay!"

"If you're not seen, come round to the front. If I'm not in sight, wait until I come."

Burnaby nodded. His red face and his eyes seemed to glow.

They got out of the car, and Burnaby went back fifty yards before he came to a gap through which he could scramble. Roger went up to the main gate, keeping behind the cover of a big hawthorn bush. The house was long and low, of grey stone with small windows which looked dark, and a slate roof. The sun had been shining over most of their route, but there were heavy clouds here, and the darkness threatened rain. There was no sign or sound at the farmhouse. The front door, with a small porch over it, was shut; it had once been painted brown, but now looked drab and blistered. None of the windows was open. But for the fowls and the occasional grunting of the pigs, there would have been no sign of life.

Roger studied the untidy garden.

It was bordered by a wire fence, and there were patches of shrubs, a few old apple and plum trees and, on one side, a farm cart which had seen better days. Everything was dilapidated. Roger watched the windows closely, saw nothing to suggest that he was being watched, started forward – and then turned and hurried back to the car. He took a long spanner from the toolbox, and wished that he had thought to warn Burnaby to take a weapon.

He approached the farm cart, which gave him cover from the house. One of the bushes was only a few yards ahead. He could get behind that, and be within twenty yards of the house itself.

Then he heard voices; men were talking. He couldn't distinguish one from

another, but they seemed to be coming from the first floor of the farmhouse. No one was at any window, but he saw that a window at the side was open; so the voices were probably coming from there.

He left the cover of the bush and ran towards the house. He reached the wall, heart thumping. He wasn't sure that he had been unseen.

Doubts crowded on him.

If he'd waited at the corner of the main road until a police car had come along, he could have brought help. His old fault – impetuosity. Would he ever be able to cure himself of it? He ought at least to have sent Burnaby back. He waited, hearing the mutter of voices, wishing that he could catch the drift of the conversation. He strained his ears for the sound of a woman's voice, but didn't hear it. The only likely reason for Maloney and Liddel to come here was to see Francesca, but there was no real reason to believe that she was here; they might have been fooled.

He heard stealthy footsteps; and Burnaby appeared at the side of the house, twenty feet away from him. Burnaby passed a ground floor window quickly, ducking low.

"Back door's shut, and no one's about outside," he said. "No dog, either." He seemed relieved.

Roger grinned.

"That's considerate! Burnaby, we've stuck our necks out too far."

"We know where they *are*," breathed Burnaby.

"No one else does. Take the car back to the main road. You may come across a police car on the prowl. If not, get to the first telephone. Call the Stamford police, report exactly where we are, and ask them to tell Scotland Yard. And we want more men here, of course."

Burnaby's disappointment was almost ludicrous.

"Don't you think between us we could—"

"Remember Peel," said Roger.

"Supposing the woman isn't here?"

"Then we'll have wasted a lot of time." Roger clapped the man on the shoulder. "Get it done and hurry back; you'll be in at the kill."

"Very good, sir." Burnaby went off, glumly. Roger watched, seeing how skilfully he took cover behind the cart and anything else which offered. The man disappeared. Roger waited for the engine of the car to start up; it didn't. That puzzled him. He found himself strained and over-anxious. Burnaby wouldn't walk; and couldn't start off without making some noise. He might have eased off the brakes and be pushing the car, so as to make no noise until he was out of earshot of the farmhouse. Was that likely?

If he himself went back to look, he would increase the risk of being seen. But he wasn't happy. Every second he expected to hear the engine, but the wanted sound didn't come.

He took a step towards the gate.

A man said: "No, you don't."

He spun round. The man had stepped from the front door of the house, and was covering him with a service rifle.

The man was small, dressed in rough tweeds, wore heavy farm boots and a heavy cloth cap which was pulled low over one side of his face. He had hunched shoulders; so hunched that he looked deformed. He also looked determined, and knew how to hold that gun. The barrel didn't quiver as it covered Roger's chest. The man's face was lean and weather-beaten; he was obviously from the farm.

Roger said: "Put that down."

"Come here, mister." The man's voice was heavily accented: north country.

"Put that gun down!"

"Just you come here, mister," the man repeated, and moved forward a step. "I'm not joking."

"I am a police officer. Put that rifle down and come here."

The man took another step forward. There was menace in his manner, in the twist of his thin lips. Apart from the sound of his own breathing and the scratching of the fowls, Roger could hear nothing. He was a mile from the main road; out of sight and out of hearing of anyone passing there. The patrolling police would not have the slightest idea where he'd gone; and Burnaby must have been stopped at the car.

He'd asked for it; and it had come.

"I'll give you one more chance," the man said, and his voice was little more than a whisper. "Don't ask for trouble, mister."

Roger began: "I am a police officer, and I order you—"

He heard a sound behind him, soft, stealthy. He half turned. He saw no one, but he was just in front of the corner of the farmhouse, another man might be creeping up. He felt his neck and his forehead damp and cold with sweat. The man with the rifle moved the barrel a few inches – and squeezed the trigger.

The shot roared out.

The bullet went over Roger's head, just a warning that the man meant business.

"I told you," the man said. "Come—"

There was a sudden scuffle of movement. Roger half turned, catching sight of another man he didn't recognise. This man had something in his right hand, raised, heavy. He brought it down savagely, struck Roger a glancing blow, and knocked his hat off. Roger tried to turn, to grapple with the man, but a second blow caught him on the forehead, sending him reeling against the wall. He was vaguely aware that the gunman was running forward, felt another blow on the top of the head, and pitched into blackness.

It was still dark.

He was coming round, but was only half conscious; darkness was the thing that impressed him most; and pain. His head seemed to be on fire. He lay still, not conscious of thinking, but aware of fear, which seemed to cover

him like a shroud.

There was no sound.

Darkness – silence – and the fire in his head; they were the only things that mattered.

He opened his eyes; and it was still dark. They hurt. He closed them again, and the pain was easier. He began to think and to remember what had happened, but he was too dazed to reproach himself. He didn't think then of Burnaby or the two men he had followed, didn't think of Francesca or of anyone; there was just the pain.

He did not know how long he lay there.

The pain began to ease, but the darkness was as impenetrable as ever; he was aware, now, of a fusty smell. The smell he might expect to find in a dungeon – or a cellar. Cellar? He remembered the farmhouse and the man with the rifle, the savage attack from behind him.

He muttered to himself, and tried to sit up. Then he discovered that his hands were bound, in front of him. He was lying on his back, that probably explained why his head hurt so much.

If he could sit up, he would feel easier.

He strained himself, to try to sit, but it was no use. He fell back, and hit his head. That made the pain worse, and he cursed aloud; cursed his own folly and the men who had done this thing. That phase passed, slowly. He lay breathing heavily.

Common sense came back.

He lay still for a while, and then turned over on his side. They hadn't bound his legs, he could move them freely. On his side, he drew one knee up. He hardly knew how he managed it, but at last he was on his knees. He stayed like that. The throbbing in his head eased, he had been right, it was better when he was upright, but he couldn't kneel for long. There was a stone floor, and it hurt his knees; soon the pain became unbearable.

He moved his right leg, put the foot firmly on the ground, and then, swaying to and fro, stood up. At last he was on both feet, still swaying but in no real danger of falling. He steadied, and took a step forward cautiously, stretching out his leg, making sure that he didn't run into a wall. At the third step his foot touched the wall. He drew the other leg up, then turned; and at last he was able to lean against the wall, his head bent slightly forward, to make sure that it didn't touch.

After a while, he felt easier.

It was still pitch dark. There could be no window in this place; no glimmer of light of any kind came in. But perhaps the window was shuttered or curtained, he could move round the place, and find out.

How long had he been there?

For all he knew, it might be night time; he had reached the farm at about half-past two.

Would he have been unconscious for several hours?

He became aware of something else; a gripping nausea in his stomach. Hunger? He forced the thought away, and moved to the right, keeping his

bound hands stretched out; that was a strain on his shoulders, but there was nothing he could do about it. His fingers grazed themselves on brick or rough stone; no doubt, this was a cellar. The fusty smell grew stronger and the sense of nausea worse.

He reached a corner, turned it, and went along the next wall; that was also blank. So was the third wall. Then he came upon a break in the rough wall, his fingers ran across something that was comparatively smooth; as wood. He moved his arms up and down, and touched a handle. Yes, this was a door.

He stood by it, so that he had only to stretch out his arms, to touch the handle.

He moved his fingers, trying to get at the cord at his wrists, but failed; there was no chance of freeing himself by untying the cords, and he had felt nothing on which he could rub the bonds, and so cut them. He waited for what seemed an age but was probably only a few minutes. He heard no sound except his own breathing, which seemed loud, and the thumping of his own heart.

He touched the handle again.

He was able to grip it, and twist. It moved. He felt a sickening sense of mingled hope and fear; the door might not be locked. He turned the handle to its full extent, and then pulled.

The door opened.

It struck his forehead, and sent more pain searing through him, but pain mattered little compared with the sense of triumph. This soon faded, for silent darkness lay ahead. He drew back, stretched out his right leg, felt the door and kicked it wider open. He knew that he was facing a passage or another room, but could see nothing.

He stepped forward, one pace at a time; and after two paces, touched another wall; so this was a passShould he turn right or left?

He turned left – and soon came upon a blank wall. He turned round slowly and painfully, and started back the way he had come, brushing the wall with his side all the time. After what seemed a crawling age, he reached another open space. His feet kicked against stone, but his hands touched nothing. He realised that he was at the foot of a flight of steps.

He began to go up. Groping, he found that there was no handrail on either side – nothing but brick or stone walls. These seemed rougher than the walls of the cellar. He went up a step at a time, counting each one. He reached seven –and there were no more. He knocked against a wall, and his head seemed to shriek in protest.

There was a wall behind him, too.

He turned to the right, and found more steps. He began to climb them, and when he had reached the fourth, saw a crack of light in front of him.

He stood swaying, filled with a strange relief; light meant everything. He studied it. There was the outline of a door, with more light at the foot than at the top or sides, but there could be no mistaking the shape. The light was

pale yellow; lamp light, certainly not daylight. He was on a level with the bottom of the door, so had several steps to mount yet. He took them cautiously. The one thing he wanted was to free his hands, but there wasn't a chance.

He reached the top of the steps.

Now, it seemed bright, compared with the darkness from which he had come. He could see the wall and the floor; they were of stone – the walls of rough stone. The door itself was perhaps two yards in front of him. Would the handle be on the right or the left? He chose to try the right, and the first thing he touched was the handle; it gave him absurd pleasure.

He turned the handle, as before; and pulled. He felt quite sure that the door would be unlocked. It didn't open at once. He pulled again, with almost petulant annoyance; why should it stick, why be obstinate the time when he most needed help from inanimate things? It still refused to move. He pulled again – tugged, and strained his arms and his shoulders, but the door wouldn't budge.

So, it was locked.

Disappointment came over him like a wave from the sea, He began to shiver. He gave himself up to an orgy of angry resentment, but that soon passed. He became dispassionate for the first time since he had been knocked out. The blows must have been severe, he was behaving like a child – he, Chief Inspector Roger West, of New Scotland Yard! He had a mind; why didn't he use it? He had no need to panic. It was the darkness and the silence – and now the dim yellow light, and the locked door. With a picklock, he could open it in a few seconds. But he hadn't a picklock, hadn't even a knife in his pocket. And if he had, he couldn't get either of them out. At least, there was light. He drew back a pace, forcing himself to keep steady. Then he raised his hands, and banged on the door with his clenched fists. The sound was startlingly loud, and the door shook. He banged again.

He heard footsteps.

He drew back, heart in mouth. He hadn't the faintest idea what to expect, knew only that someone was in the lighted room beyond here. He heard a key turn in the lock – but the door seemed a long time, opening. But it opened at last – towards him. It struck his foot. He drew his foot away quickly, as light flooded out. Against it, tall and shadowy, was Francesca Liddel.

17

TWO PRISONERS

Francesca stood back, hands raised to her breast. Her face was against the light, and Roger couldn't see her clearly, but had no doubt who she was. Now that he was with someone else, and those dread hours of loneliness were past, he felt weak. He swayed to one side, and couldn't save himself. He fell against the wall, and began to sink down. He fought to keep on his feet.

Francesca exclaimed: "It's all right!"

She stepped forward quickly, and gripped his arms. He pulled against her, but she took the strain, and he stood upright.

He grinned, foolishly: "Sorry," he said.

She kept a hold on one of his arms, and led him into the room. He took no notice of the room itself, but could see that it was small; a kind of kitchen. It was warm too. He staggered across to a table, and sat on the corner of it. Francesca let him go, and closed the door; she locked it again. Then she stood with her back towards it.

"Mr—West."

"Odd place to meet," Roger said. He grinned, and felt inane; he must do better than this, he was a senior officer of Scotland Yard. He licked his lips. "Yes. Mind untying these cords?"

It was a thick cord, and knotted very tightly.

"Just a minute," said Francesca.

She turned her back on him, went to a cupboard in a corner. Something clattered as she opened a drawer. She turned again, and had a carving-knife in her hand, glinting in the light. Roger shivered, involuntarily, but she didn't seem to notice it. She came forward, and began to cut at the rope. It was tough; a few strands fell aside, but there was a great deal still to do. She stopped.

"Harder," said Roger.

"I might cut—"

"Never mind, get me free."

She began again. It was impossible to get the blade between his flesh and the rope, she had to cut downwards. She was cautious, but twice cut the heel of his right thumb; blood welled up. She tightened her lips, but didn't let that stop her. All the strands were severed at last, and the rope fell.

"Thanks."

His wrists seemed on fire.

There were deep ridges where the rope had bitten into them, and swollen patches between. He stood there in agony while the blood poured back into his veins; it was too acute for him to move his fingers or his wrists.

He felt sick.

That passed, and he began to move his wrists gently; it was like pins and needles, caused by giant pins, giant needles. Needles! He thought of Chatworth, grinned, and then giggled. He knew that he shouldn't be giggling, but he couldn't help himself. Francesca's face started to go round in circles; so did the room. Suddenly, her face disappeared. He felt pressure at his shoulder. She helped him off the table and led him, light-headed, towards a chair. She made him sit down. It was an easy chair, and it brought blessed relief. He would have known comfort, but for the fire in his wrists. She went away, and he could see her again. When she came back, she had a cup in her hand, and put it to his lips.

Something cold and semi-sweet and rather thick – *milk*. He swallowed a little, then took a gulp. Some of the milk spilled. She took the cup away.

"You'll be all right," she said.

"I—I am all right." The milk had tasted wonderful, his mouth was no longer parched. He closed his eyes. While they were closed, he felt gentle pressure at his wrists; it hurt, but the fire had died down. She was massaging them. It wasn't long before they were better; still speckled with points of fire, but bearable. She drew back, and for the first time he was able to look at her clearly.

She was made-up, and looked as she had done when he had first seen her. She wore the same bottle-green suit, the same blouse. Beautiful! Her hair clung in dark waves about her head, she had lovely eyes. Why should he sit there, thinking about loveliness? She drew back, then went to a stove. It was an old-fashioned iron stove, black, dirty. A fire glowed red between the bars, and he saw a kettle, even heard it singing. She poked the fire noisily, and a shower of embers fell into the pan beneath. Then she went across to the dresser.

He hadn't noticed that before. He made himself study the room, and not the girl.

It was a kitchen, but too small to be in the farmhouse, he thought. The ceiling was low and discoloured. The walls had been distempered green, but needed another coat badly. There were damp patches in the corners. The dresser was Welsh fashion, light oak in colour, shiny with age. Willow-pattern crockery was placed on it, some white, yellow, and pink jugs and pale blue cups hung from hooks. There were two drawers in it.

The corner cupboard, from which she had taken the knife, had hooks above it.

There were two easy chairs, of the old-fashioned saddleback type, like that in which he was sitting. The arms were worn. There was linoleum on the floor, and an old-fashioned handmade wool rug of many colours, in front of the fire. By the chair opposite him was a small table, with books on it.

There were two old prints on the walls – a Last Supper and a Crucifixion scene, each badly faded. There was another door, too, and one window, boarded up.

He looked back at Francesca. She was cutting bread.

The kettle was boiling.

She picked up a teapot, went across and made tea, then took it back to the dresser. Next, she carried a tray to the table, and set it down. There were sandwiches, bread and butter, cheese, and some ham; a small piece of ham, and there were slices of it in the sandwiches; not as pink as ham usually is.

"I expect you're hungry, ' said Francesca.

"I am rather."

"Will you come to the table, or shall I bring the tray there?"

"Oh, I'll come." He got up. Using pressure on his wrists wasn't so good, but he managed without flinching. Francesca put a high-backed chair to the table, and when he had sat down, took out another and sat opposite him; there were two cups.

"Not hungry?" Roger asked.

"I've had supper."

"Pity." He began to eat. The bread was new, the butter luscious, the ham hadn't the usual flavour, but was home-cured.

Francesca poured out tea. She had an unnatural calm, but now that he was beginning to feel normal, he could see the tension behind that calmness. It showed in her eyes, in the tautness of her hands as she held the teapot; and when she pushed a large cup of tea towards him, her hands were unsteady.

Suddenly, he put his hand to his pocket, for his watch; it wasn't there. He felt in his other pockets; all of them were empty, even his wallet had been taken.

"What do you want?" asked Francesca.

"To get my hands on certain gentry, but for the moment, to know the time."

She had a wristwatch on, and glanced at it.

"Ten minutes past eleven."

"Is it, by George! Er—" He found himself grinning.

"You wouldn't know what day it is, would you?"

"Saturday."

"At least I haven't lost a day."

"How long had you been there?"

"The last thing I remember was just after two o'clock this afternoon."

"No wonder you were hungry," said Francesca.

"You could have let me out before."

"I didn't know you were there."

That sounded like the truth; was there any reason to believe that she was lying, or needed to lie? Roger didn't speak.

"I didn't," she repeated. "I haven't been here all day. They let me out for a few hours this afternoon – for the first time." That told a long story.

"For the first time since when?"

"Monday."

"Did Kane bring you here?"

Francesca started, and coloured. Her voice was so calm and her poise remarkable, but the signs of strain were still there.

“I know Kane,” Roger said. “He’s now awaiting trial for attacking a policeman, among other things. Did you know about that?”

“I knew—he’d attacked someone. No, he didn’t bring me here. He took me away from the house at Barnes, that’s all. Then someone else drove me up here, on Monday night.

I—” She hesitated. “I was taken to the cellar. Where you were.”

“You kept very chic through it all,” he said dryly.

She coloured again.

“They brought me some of my things, on Wednesday. I was only in the cellar for a few hours.”

“Just resting?”

“They—they tried to frighten me.”

“Why?”

“They wanted information from me.”

“What information?”

She closed her eyes and went on wearily: “I don’t know. They were still after the papers which they thought they would find at Tony’s flat. They thought I knew where they were. I think I convinced them that I don’t know anything about them. On Tuesday they let me come up here. I’ve been here ever since, except for this afternoon, when they took me for a walk. I needed that walk.”

“How many are there of them?”

“I’ve seen three.”

“Did you know them before?”

“No. Two of them belong here, I think, the third man comes from London. He’s short and dark. He hasn’t been here all the time, but he came back today.” She shivered. “I thought that something was the matter, or they wouldn’t have let me out.”

“I was the matter,” said Roger. “You knew it was Kane who attacked you and your brother, didn’t you?”

Francesca didn’t answer. Roger finished his supper, and felt better; much better. Francesca poured him out another cup of tea, and he took it to the armchair, then groped absently in his pockets for cigarettes. She took a packet from her handbag, and he lit up with relief.

“So they let you have everything you want?”

“Food and drink and cigarettes – yes.”

“Haven’t they questioned you again since the first night you came here?”

“No – the man from London does the questioning.”

“And all he’s anxious to know is about those documents?”

Francesca leaned forward in her chair, and said with great deliberation: “Mr West, I have told you everything I can. I am not lying to you.”

“There’s plenty you haven’t told me.” Roger smiled and looked at the door. He hadn’t yet found out if it were unlocked, but that really spoke for itself. If she had been kept prisoner here, the door would be locked – and the window was already shuttered. There was no inside fastening, so that was done from the outside. Until now, he hadn’t felt able to cope, but that

spell of uselessness was over, and he could think and reason. One question formed itself on his mind; why had he been left downstairs, so that he could come here and see Francesca?

They might have thought that he was safe; but must have known he would find the unlocked door and move, somehow. They hadn't left him for dead.

Or had they?

If they'd thought him dead, there was no need for explanation. If they'd known him to be alive, they had some particular reason for bringing him and Francesca together. The possible reason stood out a mile; so that they would talk, and be overheard.

His gaze roamed round the room.

The ceilings and the walls seemed solid, but there might be a spyhole in the door. There might, also be a gap between door and frame, through which the sound of voices would travel. Probably someone was listening to them; at least, he had to assume there was a risk of that. And if he were being observed, there were certain things that would be expected of him.

Since he had last spoken, Francesca had sat tight-lipped, as if half afraid of what he was going to say next. She could stay afraid for a while.

He stood up.

"What are you going to do?" Francesca asked.

"Look round. Didn't you know that we have to get out of here."

"We can't," she said. "The door's locked from the outside, the window is shuttered from the outside. And I believe that someone is always watching."

"They can't watch in the dark! They probably don't think there's any risk of escape." Roger went to the door and examined it; and wasn't pleased with what he found. The lock was a new mortice, and would be extremely difficult to force. He could imagine that it had been installed for just such an emergency as this. He pulled up a chair, and stood on it. There was a gap of over half an inch between the door and the frame; words could be heard outside all right. He saw nothing resembling a spyhole. He scanned the rest of the walls, then gave special attention to the dresser – and as he looked up and down it, he thought he saw something move.

He stopped abruptly.

Francesca stood up.

Roger searched the panels of the dresser, then saw what he half expected: a large knot hole in the wood. It was nearly an inch in diameter. He saw that the edges looked as if they had been freshly cut, and daubed with a stain to match the rest of the dresser. He didn't give much attention then, but got down from the chair, and went across to the fireplace.

"What did you see?" demanded Francesca; her voice was unsteady.

"I don't know that I saw anything." He sat back in the chair, and glanced as if casually towards the hole in the dresser. He'd made no mistake, there was an eye on the other side of the hole. So they were being watched; and anything they said in normal voices would be overheard. He stretched out his hand.

“May I have another cigarette?”

She gave him a packet which was nearly full and a box of matches.

“Thanks. Now, we’ll go back a bit. Why did you go to see Kane at the Barnes house?”

“He sent for me.”

“And you ran, like an obedient kitten!”

“I thought it wise to go.” She was on edge again, still afraid that he would ask questions she still did not want to answer.

“What happened?”

“He persuaded me to leave with him, and to come here. I didn’t know that I was actually coming to this place.”

“You knew he’d attacked someone?”

“He left me in an empty room for a few minutes. I heard someone cry out.”

“And you just stood by, doing nothing?”

She didn’t answer.

“Why were you so biddable?”

She kept silent.

Roger said: “Kane could make you do practically everything he wanted. He would call, and you would run to do his bidding. You even allowed him the run of your flat in London, when you were in America. Yet he isn’t the type you’d expect to mix with, is he?”

Francesca moistened her lips.

“Blackmail’s a nasty thing. Why was he able to blackmail you?”

She closed her eyes as if they hurt.

Roger said roughly: “The innocent stuff won’t get you anywhere, Miss Liddel. This is an ugly case. Murder, attempted murder, violence, gun play – and it all revolves round you and your family, Kane blackmailed you. What did he have on you, to make it so easy?”

She kept silent, in spite of the pressure of the circumstances. It wasn’t going to be easy to make her talk. Did he want her to? Did he want the watching and listening men to know the truth?

But they already knew the secret which made her a victim of blackmail; no harm could come from forcing that.

“Your father will be hanged, others may be killed, if you keep it back any longer,” Roger said quietly. “Why did you let Kane do what he liked? Why did you go to America? What papers was Kane after? Why—”

He stopped abruptly.

It wasn’t because of the way she sat, head against the back of the chair, eyes closed, face very drawn. It was because he saw something else move. Then he smelt something sharp, acrid – and the sight and sound merged into horror.

Smoke was creeping beneath the door.

18

SMOKED OUT

Francesca did not open her eyes; presumably did not know what was happening. Roger drew back, staring at the smoke, hypnotised by it. Now he could smell burning clearly.

Francesca opened her eyes.

"It's no use," she said, "I can't—" She broke off and started up. "What's the matter?"

She stood up, stumbling against him, clutched his arm, and looked towards the door. She didn't speak again. Like two statues, they stood together as the smoke curled in and upwards, creeping along the floor and up the walls.

Roger relaxed.

"So that's it. We oughtn't to be surprised."

Francesca breathed: "*Fire*."

"That's right. Fire, smoke, suffocation, charred bones – that's where you've led us." Roger swung round, picked up a chair and raised it above his head, and strode to the window. He smashed at the wooden shutters, aiming at the middle. The blow jarred his wrists; never mind his wrists. He smashed again, but made no impression on the wood. At the third blow, he hesitated. Wood? The resistance was so strong it seemed more like metal. He had dented the wooden surface, no more; and the chair was a light one.

He struck again; one leg of the chair fell off.

He dropped the rest, swung round, and called: "Is there a poker? Axe? Hammer?"

The only poker was a small one, about eighteen inches long, useless for such a job as smashing down the shutters or the door. The only solid piece of movable furniture was the table. He might break off a leg, but doubted whether he could.

Francesca was opening the cupboard in the corner; she found nothing. Roger looked beneath the dresser; there was no tool he could use. The only hope was at the door; if he could force that lock, he might be able to get out. He searched among the cutlery; there were some metal meat skewers, the only things likely to help him. He went across to the door, but the smoke was thick there, and he started to cough. He fought the spasm down, and thrust a skewer into the lock; it was useless, he knew it wouldn't work until it had a bent end; and even then, it was probably too thick. He swung round, took the skewer to the fireplace, and thrust it between the bars, then levered it. When he finished he had a piece about an inch long, bent at right-angles.

He didn't notice Francesca.

"Take this," she said.

She held out a damp cloth. He put it across his mouth, and she tied it at the back of his head; he could breathe through it, and there was less danger from the smoke. But it got at his eyes, and they began to water. He touched the wood of the door, and it seemed hot.

He could imagine what it was like on the other side, a roaring furnace. He didn't know how far it was from this door to a window or the front door; if the rest of the house was ablaze he probably couldn't get through, even if he unlocked the door.

The skewer went in again; but he knew that it was useless.

He drew back, and went to the window.

He tapped the shutter with the poker; the dull sound proved that the wood was either very solid or metal-lined. There was no fastening of any kind inside, the shutters stretched right across the outside.

He called: "Miss Liddel!"

She didn't answer.

He turned, looking round. The door leading to the cellar was open. The smoke filled the room now, weaving and curling about, and he thought he could hear the roar of the fire. His eyes smarted. He went across to the open door; outside it was clearer, although plenty of smoke was still there. He felt calmer; he should have thought of the cellar before. They could go down there and wait; and with luck, the fire would burn itself out before they died.

It was still dark, there. He picked up a box of matches from the table and struck a match, as he reached the foot of the stairs. Francesca appeared and began to cough. With the door open, the smoke was coming in fast. He hurried back and closed the door; at least that gave them a respite. By the light of another match, he saw Francesca in the cellar where he had first come round.

The match burnt down.

Francesca was close to him; he felt her hand touch his. Her fingers were icy.

"I can't find-anything."

"Pity."

"Do you think—" Her voice quivered.

"We've a chance if we stay here. Might try to block up the door with rags." He ought to have done that before. "Come on." He lit another match and led the way out of the cellar, but when they got to the top of the stairs, the smoke was so thick that both of them began to cough and choke.

They reached the kitchen—

It was a mass of red-tinged smoke.

Francesca, still holding his hand, tightened her grip.

Blocking the gaps at the door would have delayed the end, at most. Now that the fire had a good hold, it would burn down all the wood – the door he'd hoped to block up wouldn't last long, they couldn't keep the smoke out – and there was no exit for it, from here.

There *must* be.

He said hoarsely: “We’re going to look round again. You strike the matches. Make each one last as long as you can.” He gave her the matches, and they went down to the cellar again. Now that she released his wrist, he realised how tight and painful her grip had been. She was calm enough, and struck a match at the first try. She held it high; they walked round the cellar slowly, seeing nothing in the way of an escape hole – until suddenly the flickering light fell on a lighter- coloured patch.

Francesca cried: “Look!”

“Another mat—” Roger began, and then a fit of coughing caught him. By the time he had recovered, the second match was nearly burnt out, but sufficient light came from it to show what they were looking at.

There had been a hole in the wall; it had been blocked up and cemented over.

Francesca began to cough, and the sound was like sobbing. Roger took the matches from her, and tried again, searching the ceiling this time; and he came upon another patch, cemented in; that had been the original entrance to the cellar from outside. They were sealed off.

He said: “We’ll have to try to get through.”

He didn’t mean that; what he meant was that they should make a rush for the exit, across that wall of fire. They wouldn’t get through, but they would be devoured by the flames, killed in seconds, whereas it would take long minutes —hours?—to suffocate. He took her arm firmly and they began to walk towards the stairs. The flames were shooting through the door, and half way down the stairs. They stood still, the heat scorching their faces.

Francesca said: “We can’t.” She began to cough again, with heat as well as smoke. Even though she was standing by his side, her face was seen as through a thick mist. Her eyes were wide open and reflecting the savage flames.

Their helplessness sickened him. The futility of it appalled him. They were at the mercy of the fire, and there was no chance to get out: no chance at all.

If they plunged forward it *would* be over quickly.

If they waited here they might have a chance; but lingering death was much more likely.

He looked at Francesca, a silhouette against the lurid red-tinged smoke; and he did not see Francesca, but a picture of Janet.

Detective Inspector William Sloan no longer looked boyish or ingenuous. The local Superintendent, with him in the office at the Stamford Police Headquarters, had never seen a man look more savage nor more ruthless.

“They’re somewhere in the district,” Sloan said. “Both were reported as far as Stretton, and then they disappeared. They must be here.”

The local man said: “We’ve searched everywhere, Inspector, and haven’t found either of the cars, haven’t had any report of them. They may be in one of the woods, we haven’t had all the reports in yet. But there’s no trace.”

Sloan said: “There must be.”

He turned to a map stretched out on the Superintendent's desk, already marked with pencil lines. He traced the town where the cars had been seen, and studied the map closely.

"Could have taken any one of a dozen or more turnings," said the Superintendent. "Every man I can get hold of is searching, and we've a lot of voluntary help. Take it easy. The moment we get a squeak, we'll know about it. And there may not be any immediate danger."

"In this job, the danger's there all the time," said Sloan.

The telephone bell rang. Both men snatched at it, Sloan got it first, then let it go. The Superintendent, a thin, rakish-looking man, put the receiver to his ear.

"Superintendent Mellish speaking . . ."

"Yes . . ."

There was a pause; but not a pause in tension. Sloan saw the way the other's hand tightened, saw the sudden glint in his eyes.

"*Where*?"

Sloan held himself absolutely rigid.

"Little Shepton Farm—yes, I know it." Mellish banged down the receiver, and shouted: "Palmer!" A sergeant came in quickly. "Little Shepton Farm. Get all cars concentrated on it, hurry. I'm going straight away."

He didn't speak to Sloan, but ran out of the office. His car was waiting in the road, and he was at the wheel within sixty seconds of putting down the receiver.

Sloan sat by him.

"How far?"

"Eleven miles – good road – it won't take long."

"What's the report?"

"Three men, including your man Burnaby, were found at the farm twenty minutes ago. None of them is badly hurt. West was there early this afternoon, but isn't there now. I didn't wait for details."

Sloan grunted, and lit a cigarette. The Superintendent drove on his horn and his brakes, and policemen in the town waved him on. Once on the open road, he let the car all out; they kept near the seventy mark, slowing down only for incoming traffic. At this rate, they'd be at the farm in fifteen minutes, but – Roger wasn't there.

The countryside was undulating. In the west, towards their right, was a pale red glow in the sky.

Sloan said: "Right or left?"

"Right."

"Over there—that glow?"

The Superintendent glanced towards it, and said: "That direction. Looks like a fire."

"Your people are at the farmhouse, aren't they?"

"Should be."

Sloan lapsed into silence. They swerved to avoid a heavy milk lorry with a trailer, were vaguely aware of the driver shouting something at them. The

Superintendent kept his headlights on. They passed two signposts. The glow of the fire was much brighter and nearer now, and smoke hid the stars. They drew nearer another signpost, and Mellish said: "I think this is it."

The headlights caught the signpost and the words: 'Little Shepton'. How they missed the hedge as they swung round, Sloan would never know. He did know one thing: the Superintendent hadn't told him everything, or he wouldn't be driving with this furious energy.

The glow was almost straight in front of them. They slowed down. Men appeared at the hedges, waving them on. They breasted a low hill, and then looked down at the fire. The glow spread for miles, and they could see the skeleton framework of the blazing cottage. They could also see the cars clustered near it – and others, near another house, on the left.

"It's one of the farm cottages," the Superintendent said. "Not much water about here."

There was no fire engine in sight.

They went past the farmhouse, then stopped near the cars by the fire. The heat struck at them. Sloan jumped out, and a policeman in uniform came forward. Smoke made Sloan choke, and he didn't hear what the man said.

"What was that?" he demanded.

"Not a hope of saving the place or anyone in it," the local man said. "They're getting as near as they can, haven't seen any sign of anyone yet. It may be an empty cottage. There used to be an entrance to the cellar from outside, but it's blocked up. If anyone was in there, they'd probably go to the cellar. I've sent for pickaxes."

Sloan said: "Where's this entrance?"

"It's a bit hot close by, sir."

"Where is it?"

The policeman led the way, the Superintendent went along with Sloan. It was searingly hot, but the wind was blowing away from them, and they were able to get near. There was an entrance to what had once been a chute; feeding stuff had once been kept in the cottage cellar, and the chute used for stocking it up. The entrance itself was about twenty feet from the wall of the house. As they reached it there was a loud report, pieces of stone flew in all directions, the policeman gasped and staggered. There was another roar as part of the wall caved in.

The policeman's cheeks were bleeding.

"I'm all right, sir."

The entrance to the chute had been filled up and cemented. Sloan rapped at it with his heel, but there was only the solid cement. He felt the heat almost too much to bear, but didn't move. The uncertainty was worse, in its way, than certain knowledge. Roger might be there – might already be among that burning mass.

A car came up, and men jumped out, pickaxes began to swing. Sparks flew up from the cement, chippings flew in all directions. Another part of the cottage wall caved in, and more stones split, burning hot, and pieces came hissing towards them. One man fell, with a wound in his leg. Sloan

grabbed his pickaxe.

Other men were digging round the cement, and one man called out:

“I’m through!”

He was pulling the point of his pickaxe out, with an effort.

Others joined him, and began to attack the weak spot. The red glow and the headlights of the cars showed everything clearly – grotesque figures of sweating men as they flung themselves into the attack.

The hole grew larger.

A man tossed his tool away, and said in a hoarse voice:

“I can get down there now, I reckon.”

He didn’t ask for approval, but lowered himself into the chute, and disappeared.

19

SOME ANSWERS

He ought to have had a rope," Sloan said. "Any here?"

Another man came forward.

"Plenty." He was tying a rope round his waist.

"I want to go down," Sloan said.

"Too big, sir – you'll only get wedged." The man tossed the rope to another, and then followed the first down the chute. He disappeared more slowly. As he went, there was a shout; it might have meant anything or nothing.

The man holding the rope said: "Better get ready to pull, they'll suffocate down there."

Others came forward and took the rope, the Superintendent and Sloan joining them. There was another shout – and the word was distinguishable. "Pull!" They pulled, and there was a heavy weight on the end of the rope. Gradually, someone appeared.

A woman's head; a woman's body, with the rope tied round her shoulders, and behind her, clinging to the end of the rope, the first of the men who had ventured down. He staggered as he was helped out, and muttered almost unintelligibly: "'Nother one—hurry! 'Nother one—hurry!"

Five minutes later, Roger and Francesca were lying side by side on the grass near the cottage, their faces red in the glow, their eyes closed. The Superintendent was bending over the woman, Sloan was standing and staring down at Roger. His teeth were clamped together, and stayed clamped until Mellish finished with Francesca, gave instructions to the waiting police, and then came to Roger.

"Any hope?" Sloan growled.

"Touch and go with the woman, I think." The Superintendent bent down, and began to examine Roger. He seemed to be there for an age; Sloan's teeth were gritting together so fiercely that his jaws ached.

The Superintendent stood.

"He's tougher," he said. "I should think he'll be all right."

At the Bell Street house Mark Lessing sat in Roger's chair, while Janet stood by the window, looking out into the dark night. It was nearly one o' clock. The last news had come through just after twelve, and that had really been no news. All they knew was that Roger had been missing since early afternoon.

Janet turned round. Her eyes were glassy, her face hadn't a touch of colour.

"Let me get you a drink," Mark said.

"No, thanks. Mark, it couldn't happen like this, could it?"

"Of course it couldn't! Roger's been in plenty of tight places, this time—"

"That's just it." Janet's voice was low, colourless. "There'll be one he doesn't get out of. I've been scared ever since the attack on Peel. And I've always thought it would come when we didn't really expect it. Suddenly." She raised clenched hands. "How I hate his job!"

"We'll get news," Mark said.

Janet didn't speak, but he saw tears flooding her eyes. She flung herself out of the room, and he heard her going up the stairs. To see the boys, of course. He thought it better that she should be alone, there. But he stood up – and the telephone bell rang.

He snatched at it, and knocked it off the table. He was straining to stretch the cable from the floor to his ear when Janet burst in. She stood in the doorway, eyes rounded, mouth open.

A man said: "Tell Mrs West that everything's all right, will you?"

''Hurt?"

"Not seriously, he'll be as good as new in a couple of days." "Wonderful!" cried Mark, for Janet's benefit.

When he reached her she was crying.

Roger was in a small room – a ward in a hospital or nursing home. The walls were pale green, the enamel bedstead a deeper green. There was a faint smell of antiseptics. The square window showed a bright garden of sunlight striking the tops of trees. He smiled faintly, contrasting this with the smoke-filled cellar.

Then he thought of Francesca.

He sat up sharply. He was stiff, but could move freely. His mouth and lips were sore and his eyes were painful, but the pain wasn't excessive, he knew there was nothing seriously the matter with him. There were plasters on his hands where he'd grazed them on the walls of the cellar. But that hardly mattered; how was Francesca?

On the bedside table was a thermometer in a glass pot, a bunch of grapes, and a bell-push. He pressed the bell and picked off several grapes. He was still eating them when a nurse came in, middle-aged, motherly, grey-haired.

"Good morning. How are you feeling?"

"All right, thanks." He kept his voice steady. "There was a lady with me."

"Yes, she's in the next ward," the nurse said. "She hasn't recovered so quickly as you, but she'll be all right. She's sleeping quite normally now."

Roger relaxed. "That's fine, thanks."

"I'll ask the doctor to come and see you," said the nurse, "unless there's anything else you want first."

"No, thanks."

The doctor was young, slight, a miniature Greek god, with a pleasant manner and a world of mellow assurance in his voice. The wise thing was for Roger to stay where he was for today.

"And I've telephoned the police station, where another Scotland Yard officer is waiting," said the Greek god. "I'd see him first, if I were you."

"There's no harm in that," Roger agreed.

The Yard man was Sloan. He arrived half an hour afterwards, buoyant, almost boisterous and more boyish than ever, and crushed Roger's hand. He looked fighting fit, and had only a few scratches on his hands to show for the night's excitement. There was a small armchair in the ward, and he sat back and stretched his legs out comfortably.

"And why so happy?" Roger demanded. "Is everything sewn up?"

"Not by a long way! But compared with what I thought would happen last night, everything's wonderful. Janet phoned and ordered me to send the grapes. She wanted to come up, but I told her there was no need."

"Did she know—"

"She had a bad hour or two, that's all."

Janet had been through a 'bad hour'. It was so simple, said like that, but Roger could conjure up thought of her mental agony, could picture all that had happened; the one good thing was that Mark had been with her.

"Francesca Liddel came off worse than you," Sloan went on, "but she'll be able to talk in a day or two."

"If we can find a way of making her talk," Roger said. "Let me have the story as far as you know it, will you? How did you find us?"

"That's chiefly due to a certain Mr Maloney," Sloan said, and chuckled. "I thought that would shake you."

"I'm not yet convinced."

Sloan shrugged. "I don't pretend that he's in the clear, but he was trussed up with Burnaby and Anthony Liddel at that farmhouse. He managed to free himself. He released the others and staggered out, and one of the searching policemen found him. That brought us to the cottage, which was on the farm. The local people are checking on the farmer, and will give us a full report. For the rest . . ."

Roger listened patiently; and after it, decided not to return to London until the next day.

He reached London soon after lunchtime, spent a couple of hours at home with Janet, and then went to the Yard. He read through the various reports, about which Sloan had told him. A full report was to follow about the men who lived at the farm – both named Harring. Roger telephoned to the hospital for a report on Francesca; she was making steady progress. He looked through the newspapers, which had splashed the story heavily, but there was nothing useful in any of them. Kane was still refusing to talk. None of the three men who had been at Little Shepton Farm had been caught. The two cars had been found in a wood, a few miles away – undamaged. The things he still didn't know were many.

The door opened, and Chatworth loomed up.

"Well, Roger?"

"Hallo, sir!"

"You're not looking too bad."

"Except for a swollen throat and some stiffness, I'm all right," Roger said.

"Lucky chap!"

"Yes, I know I asked for it," Roger said ruefully. "I've been looking through the reports."

"What do you make of them?" Chatworth took a cigarette from a packet on Roger's desk, and lit it, then looked at the lighted end as if with suspicion. He sat on a corner of the desk, towering massively over Roger.

"That we haven't the main answer yet, which is obvious. That the man from London Francesca Liddel talked about replaces Kane as the danger on the other side. That Francesca Liddel has admitted being blackmailed, but hasn't yet said why. That the whole family appears to have been blackmailed, one time or another. That Francesca had a special mission to the United States, and hasn't told us what it was, and that Al Maloney isn't all he seems to be."

"A nice lot of negatives," Chacworth said. "There's news from New York. They've traced a young Al Maloney at the Hotel Commodore, and that Francesca Liddel met him there. Does it help?"

"I'm going to see Liddel and Maloney now," said Roger. "We might get something positive out of one of them."

Chatworth glared at the end of the cigarette with even greater suspicion.

"Not a hope," he said. "But try."

Maloney opened the door of the Hillcourt Mews flat. He had a patch of plaster over his right eye, and his left eye was purple; but his grin was there, and obviously he had seen Roger from the window.

The sitting room was empty.

"Where's friend Liddel?" asked Roger.

"Being filial, and visiting his mother. She had a relapse. Someone told him it was after a visit from you, and so he's breathing vengeance."

"If he'd breathe sense, it would help. The same applies to you. Why did you go north?"

"My, my!" exclaimed Maloney, and his grin seemed to split his face in two; and made him positively ugly. "Can't *you* read. I've told three policemen already and signed a statement."

"I want to know the truth," Roger said. He sat on the arm of a chair, and accepted a *Camel* from a battered packet. He felt up to tackling Maloney, and sensed that the American was uneasy.

"You know the truth, Inspector! We had a message saying if we went to this place, we'd find Frankie. That's what we told you we were going to do. Maybe we were fools to go alone, but we'd been told not to parley with policemen. That man knew a thing or two. Still imagine that Frankie went off on her own sweet accord?"

Roger said clearly: "I don't know."

"What?" Maloney barked.

"I said, I don't know."

Maloney backed a pace, and frowned. His expression was strained and anxious, and there was something else in it: wariness?

“What in hell are you saying? Frankie nearly died. Another half an hour, and I guess she would have. Think she did that herself?” ‘

“Accidents happen. I’ve no proof that she had been kept there against her will.”

“You’re crazy!”

“Not I,” said Roger. “Everyone is crazy who has been fooling around without telling us why. I don’t know that Francesca Liddel was kidnapped. I only know that it looks that way, and she might have built it up, to make it seem convincing – and made one fatal mistake.”

Maloney growled: “What mistake?”

“Trusting a man who couldn’t be trusted. A man who decided she was better out of the way.”

Maloney swung round, and spoke over his shoulder.

“You’re still crazy.”

“You’re still suspect.”

Maloney turned, but didn’t look straight into Roger’s eyes. He played with his tie, a splash of many colours.

“Didn’t anyone tell you that if I hadn’t found my way out of those knots, you and Francesca would be dead by now?”

“Yes, they told me.”

“What am I suspected of? Saving the life of a cop who’d be better dead?”

Roger said: “No one’s told me how it was you happened to get free. No one’s told me why the men who were supposed to have tied you up were careless with you. They weren’t careless about many things. No one’s told me whether you did your gallant act after you thought that Miss Liddel and I would be roasted alive. And don’t tell me I’m crazy. I want all the answers.”

20

SUDDEN DEATH

Maloney flung himself across the room, opened a cabinet, and took out a bottle of Scotch. It was not yet twelve o'clock. He poured out half a small glass, and tossed it down. Finished, he held the bottle out to Roger.

"Like some poison?"

"This case started with poison – did you know? Arsenic. A man was killed with it. He thought he was eating an ordinary dinner, and someone put arsenic into it. That gave him a painful death."

"The whisky's all right."

"I wouldn't be so sure. You're playing about with dangerous people. They'll kill you as cheerfully as they'll take your money or your help. What makes you trust anyone? What makes you so friendly with Anthony Liddel?"

Maloney said: "He's a nice guy. I like him almost as well as his sister. I haven't got the answers. I fell in love with Frankie and came to help her, and from now until I break my neck, I'm going to do just that."

"I'm glad you've put a limit on it. Poison or a broken neck lead to the same shaped coffin."

"For an English dick," said Maloney, "you use funny tactics."

"I'm trying to talk your language. I'm telling you that either you're in this up to your neck, or else you're on the list for murder."

"Wrong, both times."

"Where's Liddel?"

"Seeing his mother."

Roger said: "Mind if I use your phone?" He stretched out and plucked it off the cradle, dialled the Maybury Crescent number, and waited while the ringing sound came. Maloney put the Scotch on a table, and thrust both hands deep into his pockets.

A woman answered: "This is Mr Liddel's house."

"Who is that speaking?"

"Maisie, sir—Mrs Liddel's maid."

"Mr Anthony Liddel, please."

"Mr Anthony? *He's* not here."

"Has he been there this morning?"

"I don't think so, sir—who is that?"

"Chief Inspector West. Find out if he's been, will you? I'll hold on." He watched Maloney, who didn't speak. The maid was gone for some time, and there were crackling noises on the telephone. When she came back, she sounded breathless.

"No—no, sir, he hasn't been, but the nurse says can you come?"

"Why?"

"Madame's *very* ill again, sir – ever so ill"

"I'll come," said Roger. He rang off, and didn't move. Maloney found it easier to meet his eye, now, perhaps because of the Dutch courage from the bottle. A car backfired in the distance.

"I can't make everyone a little George Washington," Maloney said.

"You could start on yourself. Did you see your father before you left New York?"

"What a cop! I've no father."

"Your uncle."

"What is this, a personality parade?"

"A straight question – did you see your uncle before you left New York?"

Maloney strolled across to him.

"As far as I know, I haven't a relation in the world. That's another thing that's true, but I guess, you won't believe it. I'm going to have a close relation soon, if I can fix it my way. A wife."

Roger went out. Maloney didn't move after him, and wasn't at the window when he reached the courtyard. The policeman on duty in the mews nodded. Roger beckoned him.

"Did Mr Liddel go out this morning?"

"Yes, sir."

"What time?"

"Nine twenty-five. He went on foot—that is, he didn't take his car, he might have taken a taxi when he was out."

"Thanks." Liddel was out, then, not hiding in the flat; why should he hide? Why should any of the Liddels hide anything, even at such great risk to their lives? There had been a moment when Roger had thought that the case was nearly over. He didn't thank that, now. From the beginning, he hadn't been happy about it, least happy about the resigned way in which James Liddel had taken everything. A willing sacrifice – for what? The answer seemed to be that he was shielding someone else – but whom? There was no real evidence of it, only indications, and they might have built themselves up in his own mind. As things stood, Liddel was still awaiting trial. There was fresh evidence that there had been strange happenings in the family, none to shake the available evidence about the murder of Lancelot Hay.

Should he try to probe more deeply into Hay's life?

He'd done that thoroughly, but what he hadn't done was to try to find out whether Hay and Kane had crossed each other's path. That was a new angle. Hay had been a wastrel, a no-good – and so had Kane. He stopped at the telephone kiosk and called the Yard. Sloan answered.

"I'll do what I can." Sloan was dubious. "It'll take time, Roger."

"We might strike lucky early. I'm going to see Mrs Liddel, I'm told she's had another relapse."

"Want any help?"

"Might be wise to have Maltby stand by, if he's about," said Roger. He trusted Maltby's medical opinion above most people's; and Mrs Liddel's private doctor had a bias against the police.

In the morning sunlight, the houses in Maybury Crescent looked as pleasing as they could. There was stateliness in the terraced houses on either side, a suggestion of well-being; this was a residential backwater, in which commerce and the professions had not yet penetrated. The brasses outside Number 11 shone, and the green door glowed; it had been painted within the past few months, before there had been any shadow of dark events.

But there had been; the blackmail had been proceeding then – it had been going on for years. Lancelot Hay had often come into this house.

He rang the bell – and it opened almost before his finger came off the bell-push. The maid, Maisie, was no longer calm, but red-faced and alarmed. She backed away, hands at her flat breast, and she was breathing heavily, just as she had been when she had come to the telephone.

"The doctor's with her, sir, oh, she's *terribly* ill."

Roger ran up the stairs. He saw the door of the bedroom, ajar; that puzzled him, until Nurse James came hurrying from another room, carrying a bucket. The nurse looked strained. She didn't speak, but nodded towards the room. He heard a sound of retching, and went in.

The nurse had hurried to the bedside. Mrs Liddel was sitting up, her face pale – almost yellow in colour and distorted. The doctor stood over her, on one side, a middle-aged and portly man. He was fitting up some kind of contraption which was familiar enough to Roger. It was a stomach-pump.

He didn't seem to notice Roger.

The nurse came to him, and said: "Don't stay. This started this morning, about ten o'clock. It's been terrible. I don't know whether we shall save her."

"Anyone been to see her?"

"I don't think—"

"Hurry, nurse," said the doctor testily. He looked up, started, and waved Roger away imperiously. The nurse joined him. Roger went out, thinking of all the implications. He didn't go downstairs.

Lancelot Hay had died of arsenic poisoning, after such symptoms as this.

He heard Maisie walking across the hall. The front door opened, and Maltby came in bustling, looking more like a tame gorilla than ever. He caught sight of Roger at the head of the stairs.

"What's the panic?"

"More arsenic, I shouldn't wonder. They're using a stomach-pump."

"Ho-ho!" exclaimed Maltby. "I'll go and lend a hand." He went in, waving at Roger as he disappeared. Roger went slowly downstairs, and Maisie was standing at the foot of them, her hand still at her breast. She seemed asthmatic.

"Oh, sir!"

"She'll be all right, she has two doctors looking after her," Roger said soothingly. "Maisie, are you sure that no one came here this morning?"

"Oh, *yes*, sir. No one's been here. Mr Anthony telephoned, and cook took the message. There's only me and cook here just now, sir, it's a big house to run for the two of us."

"I'm sure it is. Where is cook now?"

"She's out shopping, she won't let *anyone* else select the fish, she always does it herself, and we have to have such a lot of fish these days."

"Where have you been all the morning?"

"Well—"

"I only want to know what part of the house you've been in, since cook went out – how long has she been out?"

"She went about nine-fifteen, sir. And I was upstairs, doing the bedrooms, I did Madame's very well this morning. She was looking ill and said she had pains in her stomach when I last looked in. Then when you telephoned, the nurse told me to send for you. She *will* be all right, won't she?"

"I think so. You didn't come downstairs after cook had gone?

"No, not once."

"Show me the back door, will you?" asked Roger.

He already knew where it was. Unlike many of the houses in this part of London, there was a service road at the back, and therefore a back entrance. He was taken through spacious, modernised kitchen quarters to the back door, and Maisie fluttered about the kitchen, quite sure that she didn't know what the Inspector *could* be looking for. Roger hardly knew himself; just evidence that someone else had been here, that Maloney had told the truth.

Suddenly, he said: "Does Mrs Liddel approve of cook smoking in the kitchen?"

"Cook *smoke*? Why, I've never heard such a thing. She won't have anyone smoke in here. I never smoke, either, sir, I don't know what you mean."

There was a cigarette butt near the big yellow Aga cooker. He didn't mention it, but sent Maisie out to make sure she wasn't wanted upstairs. He retrieved the cigarette stub; the end was damp. It was not much more than half smoked, and the familiar name Player's was printed on it in pale blue ink. He put it in a small envelope and slipped the envelope into his waistcoat pocket. Then he inspected the back door. It hadn't been forced, but probably it was kept open during the day. That was something he had to check with Maisie.

She was in the hall, still fluttering; and quickly became indignant. Of course, cook had a key; they wouldn't dream of going out without making sure that the door was locked. Mr Liddel had always been most strict about that, and so had Mrs Liddel.

"Who has a key of the back door?" Roger asked.

"Well, sir—"

"Just tell me simply, Maisie." The girl seemed to be frightened out of her wits, and soon it would be impossible to get any sense out of her.

"There—there's me and cook, sir, and Johnson, the butler, when he's at home; he's had to go away because of some illness in his family."

"And who else?"

"Well—*all* the family, of course, and Mr Hay had one."

"A back-door key?"

"The garage is near the back entrance, just at the end of the alley, and

they often came in the back way," Maisie said. "I do wish I knew why you were asking all these questions, Mr West, I'm sure I've done nothing I shouldn't do, but I don't know whether I ought to answer." She was almost in tears.

"You've done just what you should do," Roger assured her, gently. "Let me have your key, will you?"

She surrendered it, without a protest.

He heard a door opening upstairs. Maltby came hurrying down, and waved Maisie away.

"Well?" Roger almost barked the word.

"Oh, we've saved her. We were in plenty of time."

"Arsenic?"

"I'll tell you definitely in a couple of hours, but I'll be surprised if that isn't the answer. The symptoms all add up. The family GP upstairs doesn't want to admit it, says it could be extreme nervous reaction following the series of shocks, but I think you can rule that out. It's arsenic or some other irritant poison. If she hadn't been under that nurse's care, we might have been too late. You know, Handsome, I don't think you've found Lancelot Hay's murderer yet."

"He's still around," Roger said. "I haven't had much doubt about that for a long time." He looked through the house quickly, stopping for some minutes in the darkroom on the half-landing. He poked about, but found nothing of new interest.

He left with Maltby, after telephoning the Yard for two men to stand by. He did not drive to the Yard, but to Liddel's flat. The green Talbot was outside the garage, but neither of the men was there. Roger hurried up the stairs, and knew that he had been observed; and this time, it was Anthony Liddel who opened the door.

He grinned; there was little or no difference between his attitude and Maloney's. They went into the living room.

"Having a busy morning?"

Roger said: "How was your mother when you saw her?"

"My dear policeman! I haven't seen her. I decided that I couldn't bear more grief."

"Where have you been?"

"Walking's good for a man. Any objection?" "You'd better prove you walked," Roger said. "Mind showing me your keys?"

He fingered the one he had taken from Maisie, as he watched Liddel. Liddel didn't like the request, and started to protest, then shrugged his shoulders and took out the keys on his ring. His hand was unsteady. There were three Yales in all. Roger took out the one from Maybury Crescent; one of Liddel's was identical.

"So what?" Liddel asked.

"Interesting," said Roger. "Mr Liddel, I shall ask you to swear on oath, very soon, that you did not visit your mother at her house this morning. That will be a serious matter. Would you care to think again, before you

answer?”

“Be damned to you, no!”

Maloney appeared in the doorway, hands in pockets, slouching, frowning.

“I’d like you to come with me,” Roger said.

The words were hardly out of his mouth before Liddel smashed a blow at his face. It caught him completely unawares and sent him reeling back. Then Liddel turned and rushed out of the room, and Maloney made way for him.

21

FARMHOUSE FIND

Roger recovered, went forward, saw Maloney looming in front of him, obstructive but not aggressive. He blocked the doorway. Roger didn't pull up, and Maloney stayed where he was. Roger smashed a straight left into the American's stomach, saw the look of pained surprise before Maloney doubled forward. Roger pushed him away, squeezed between him and the door, and reached the hall.

The door was closed.

He shouted, but shouting wouldn't help much, the man outside should stop Liddel. A car engine started up. Roger pulled open the door, and heard the car go off. When he reached the mews, Liddel was disappearing, and the watching detective was lying flat on his back.

He struggled up.

Roger called: "See which way it goes." He went back, forcing himself not to hurry. Maloney was leaning against a chair, pressing his hands into his stomach. There was a greenish tinge to his face, reminiscent of Mrs Liddel. Roger went to the telephone and dialled 999. He was soon speaking to the Information Room at the Yard.

"This is West. Put out a general call for Anthony Liddel, driving a green Sunbeam Talbot, registration number X1252, now in the West End. You have a description of Liddel. Hold him for assaulting a police officer. Warn all patrols that he may be armed and is violent. Understood?"

"All understood, sir."

"Thanks." Roger rang off. Maloney had been watching him, while gently massaging his stomach. He looked better than he had a few minutes ago, and his lips were twisted in a wry smile.

"You pack quite a punch," he said.

"Several kinds of punches," said Roger. "Another kind will catch up with you soon." He went out, without another word. Maloney watched him, silent, still rubbing his stomach.

Outside, the detective was fingering his right knee.

"He turned right, sir."

"What happened to you?"

"I went to detain him, and he kicked me – caught me on the kneecap. I'd like to—"

"You'd better be relieved until you've had that seen to," said Roger. "I'll send someone. Report if Maloney leaves, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

Roger drove back to the Yard, walked briskly to his office, and found Sloan poring over a pile of files. Sloan looked up, and his eyes rounded.

"What's up?"

“Anthony Liddel on the rampage, his mother down with arsenic poison,” Roger said briefly. He rang the bell for a sergeant, who came in at once. “Have the man at Hillcourt Mews relieved, he’s had a slight accident.”

“Right, sir!”

Roger put down the receiver. Sloan was standing up, frowning. The office was silent, the familiar sound of traffic going along the Embankment and the whistle of an engine some way off were the only sounds. Sloan smoothed down his straw-coloured hair, but didn’t speak until Roger relaxed and stretched out his hand for a cigarette.

“So it’s turned full circle,” Sloan said. “We’re back to arsenic. Think Liddel gave it to her?”

“That’s the way it points.”

“So he could have poisoned his cousin Lancelot.”Could’s the word. And it’s conceivable that his father knew it, and is shielding him.” Roger went over what had happened, while looking at the back-door key. “I don’t think there’s any doubt that he was at the house and saw his mother. But there’s one odd thing.”

Sloan waited for him to say what it was.

“He told Maloney where he was going, and Maloney told me. That doesn’t argue premeditated poisoning, does it?”

“So you’re not falling for the obvious,” Sloan said.

“I know there’s a hell of a lot we don’t know,” Roger said. He smoked in silence for a few minutes, and then stretched out for the telephone, but he didn’t lift the receiver immediately. “You haven’t found anything to suggest that Lancelot Hay and Kane were acquainted, have you?”

“No.”

“Any news from the north – about the farmhouse?”

“No, not about the farmhouse. Francesca Liddel’s much better, she’ll be out of hospital tomorrow.”

“I think I’ll go and see Francesca today,” Roger said. “Getting about in this job, aren’t I?” He gave a humourless laugh. “I’m feeling very pleased with myself! I could have held Liddel, and in his frame of mind I think he would have talked. Now—” He broke off, shrugging.

“We’ll pick him up,” Sloan said confidently.

“I hope so.” Roger picked up the telephone receiver. “Give me Detective Officer Burnaby, will you?” He held on, until Burnaby came on the line. “Burnaby, I’m going north again, and it’ll be a quieter journey. Care to come with me?”

“That’s very good of you, sir—yes.”

“In half an hour, then,” Roger said, and rang off. “Bill, call the Stamford people for me, and tell them I’ll be there this afternoon, will you? I’d like to have a look at that farmhouse in daylight, and get the story of the people who owned it. I’d like to give Little Shepton Farm more attention.”

“Now what’s in your mind?” Sloan asked.

Roger shrugged.

“Like to know what’s in mine?” asked Sloan.

Roger leaned back in his chair.

"I've been waiting for that, Bill. You've come back fresh to it, and probably see a dozen things which I haven't noticed."

"What a hope!" Sloan waved a disclaimer. "You haven't missed anything, but you may not have sorted everything out the way I have. First, the blackmailing of James Liddel was said to be because of a love child – remember?"

Roger nodded.

"We don't know where this love child went to or what happened to him. There's a statement that it was a boy, but we don't know that for certain. We do know that a Mr Al Maloney is extremely interested in Francesca Liddel, and we also know he has no relatives."

"The love child."

"Possibly. Meaning that the story that Maloney is in love with Francesca is all hooey. That's his excuse for the interest he's taking in the case."

"Well, it could be," Sloan said.

"Yes. And from there?"

"We want to know why Francesca went to the States. Why not simply to find her half-brother?"

"I'd rather know why?"

"Because her father was being blackmailed. At the time she doesn't know that the blackmailer is Lancelot Hay. She knows about a Mr Maloney who's been writing to her mother, and she goes to check that. But young Maloney isn't the blackmailer, because he has all the money he could possibly want. And she finds this Maloney and falls for him. That doesn't make her happy. It would explain her manner when she arrived back – why she was so strange, why she—"

"Didn't want her photograph taken?"

"I haven't got the answer to that one, but when a woman's worked up to hysteria pitch, she gets whims and fancies. And apparently she's always disliked it. The photograph incident might mean nothing much."

"I could believe it if she hadn't been to see Cardew of the *Record*. Well, we'll see. What else, Bill?"

"Well, if Anthony Liddel killed Lancelot, he wouldn't be above killing his mother, if—well, let's put it this way. She's put up a show of near hysteria – she's highly emotional. That might be because she knows her son was the killer and seemed ready to let her husband hang for the murder he committed. Shocking situation for a woman to find herself in. Let's say that Anthony saw his mother this morning, discovered that she knew the truth, and decided to get rid of her."

"If she suspected him, would she take anything to eat from him?"

"If her breakfast tray was in the room, he could have slipped it in."

Roger said: "Yes, he *could* have done. I don't know. I'll be glad when they've picked up Liddel. We ought to have some word by now." He called the Information Room, but there was no news.

He had hardly put the receiver down before the telephone rang.

"Information Room again, sir. We've just had word that the Sunbeam Talbot has been picked up on Hampstead Heath."

"Liddel?"

"No sign of him, yet."

Roger grunted. "Thanks." He put the receiver down and looked at Sloan. "Make that priority, Bill – get Anthony Liddel."

Burnaby had unsuspected qualities: he was an excellent driver, and, now that there was no overriding excitement, a silent and tactful man. He took the wheel halfway along the road to Stamford, and drove while Roger leaned back, letting thoughts trickle through his mind. He knew better than to force them at this stage. He hardly noticed the green countryside, the pleasant beauty of fields and wooded patches, or the passing traffic; or Burnaby. He pondered all that Sloan had said, all that had followed Francesca's visit to Bell Street. Somewhere in the early stages of this second part of the investigation was a clue which, when he recognised it clearly, would probably explain most of what had happened. He fastened on to Francesca's fear for her mother. If she had really been frightened, and he thought she had, it would easily be explained if she knew that her brother was the murderer."

Would she keep silent?

She was fond of her father; that seemed to be the one normal relationship in the family. If he thought it worthwhile keeping silent and making the great sacrifice, then Francesca might be persuaded to. But it wasn't satisfying; it wasn't a big enough motive. He could not bring himself to believe that father and daughter would keep silent, knowing the truth, if the truth were the only reason for their silence.

That would make it a family affair, pure and simple. It wasn't just a family affair. Kane was an interloper. So was the mysterious 'man from London' who had questioned Francesca at the farmhouse, and who had set the cottage on fire. It could have been Maloney or Anthony Liddel, if Francesca had lied. But while it was possible to imagine a motive for Anthony, there wasn't one for Maloney – there was no reason at all why Maloney should lend himself to this kind of intrigue simply for the sake of the family.

There was no reason at all to believe that Maloney was a crook.

There were indications, but no real evidence, that Maloney might be Francesca's half-brother.

The more he thought about it, the more he felt that the mystery was not simply family intrigue.

Burnaby broke a long silence.

"We won't be long now, sir."

"No." Roger glanced at the dashboard clock. "Half-past three – we've done it in good time. You enjoy driving, don't you?"

"Always had one ambition," said Burnaby, greatly daring. "It started off wanting to be a racing-car driver, and now – what wouldn't I give to be a

Flying Squad driver, sir!

Roger smiled faintly. “I’ll see what can be done.”

“You didn’t mind me saying—” Burnaby was anxious.

“Not a bit. If you want to risk your neck, there’s no reason why I should try to stop you. Married?”

“No, sir.”

They drove more slowly through the outskirts of Stamford, and just before four o’clock, reached the police station. Both Roger and Burnaby were recognised by the man on duty outside, were told that the Superintendent was waiting for them, and were ushered up to his office.

“You go and get some tea, Burnaby,” Roger said.

“Thank you, sir.”

Superintendent Mellis was as thin-faced, deep-voiced, and hospitable as ever. Within two minutes of Roger entering the office, tea and cakes were brought in; appetizing-looking cakes, and Roger liked icing. The Superintendent was anxious to know how things were progressing, but had little new information. He had seen Francesca Liddel that morning, and, although she was actually much better, wasn’t yet herself.

“What about the farmhouse?” Roger asked.

“I thought we’d go and have a look over it after tea,” said Mellish. “Its owner, Fred Harring, has always been a queer stick. That’s the man with the humped back, who had the gun. The man who hit you must have been his son – Matthew. The wife died in childbirth. They’ve never been very successful, and sold most of the land – it’s little more than a smallholding now. They lived there together, no woman in the place, a couple of misanthropes. During the war there was the usual scandalous talk about them – a whispering campaign that they were spies, mysterious lights seen shining up from the roof when the Nazis came over, you know the stuff.”

“Did you investigate?”

“Oh, yes. Not a scrap of evidence. I saw them myself. Got the impression that they didn’t care who won the war, and didn’t mind how long it lasted, it was their only spell of real prosperity. They must have made plenty of money then, but never seemed to show it. They’ve probably got a big bank account somewhere, but not in Stamford. I’ve checked. They have about six hundred pounds standing to their credit. Have another cake.”

“I wish your baker lived in London,” Roger said. “Thanks. Any information about recent visitors?”

“Rumours and facts which have come since the fire. A farmworker who lives in a cottage a couple of miles away says he saw a car outside several times, and that the Harrings had several visitors lately. All men. He didn’t get close to see them well, we can’t get any description, but it’s probably true. It’s certainly true that the cottage was let to a man named Smith, who stayed there for weekends and did some lonely rough shooting. More tea?”

“No, thanks, I’d like to get out to the farm. Any description of Smith?”

“Small and dark,” said Mellish. “Well, I’m ready.” He stood up briskly. “If you’re going to bring your man, I needn’t bring anyone else. We’re stretched

to the limit for staff. Mind if we go in my car?"

Roger chuckled. "Please yourself."

The farmhouse looked exactly as he remembered it. The fowls still scraped, and the pigs still grunted; a neighbour was looking after them, Mellish said. Half a mile away, on the slope of a hill, the charred ruins of the cottage looked black and desolate. No one was about. They took the car as near as they could, and walked to the chute. The hole had been greatly widened, and it was possible to see into the cellar. A ladder had been placed so that anyone could get down easily.

"Doesn't it give you the shivers?" asked Burnaby.

"Not yet," said Roger. "Hold those steps, will you?"

Once down and in the semi-darkness, he felt shivery. It was cold, and his memories of this place weren't good. He saw the rough stone face of the walls, where he had barked his knuckles – and looked at his hands, where the scratches were healing.

"I'm coming," Mellish called, and came carefully down the steps. Their voices sounded hollow. "Anything special you're looking for?"

"The odd chance. What was stored here, do you say?"

"Feeding stuffs for cattle. The cottage wasn't used for years, then this man Smith rented it, and lived here occasionally. They kept oil-cakes down here some winters, swedes, mangels, and turnips at other times."

Roger said: "Normal enough." He stood by the cemented patch in the wall. "I wonder why that's there. It doesn't seem to lead anywhere, there couldn't be a window down here."

"Just to block up a hole in the wall, I suppose," said Mellish.

"Could we have a look?"

Mellish was startled. "Well—yes, I suppose so. It'll need some men on the job, you know what it's like breaking through a wall like that, and we can't use a pneumatic drill here. Well, we could, but it's hardly worth it. What do you expect to find?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. It just puzzles me."

Mellish wasn't enthusiastic, but sent for men and pickaxes. It was over an hour before they arrived, nearly an hour and a half before the cement was broken away, and the men were able to pull out pieces of rock which made the walls of the cellar. It was nearly dark, and they were working in the light of smelly oil lamps and powerful electric torches. Mellish, still unimpressed, was there with Roger; Burnaby was taking a breather upstairs.

A man exclaimed suddenly.

"Found something?" Mellish demanded, and stepped forward. His voice rose. "Great Scott!"

Roger, looking over his shoulder, saw the body of a man, bent double, in that hole in the wall.

22

COLD HOSPITALITY

The man was taken out of the hole carefully and laid on a tarpaulin, then lifted out. There was little sign of putrefaction; the sealing up explained that. The light of car headlamps shone on the pale, slack face, the closed eyes, the nearly bald head with tufts of grey hair at the sides; and there was a little grey beard. A bullet hole gaped in the right temple, and part of the back of the head was gone. He was fully dressed in a suit of browny-beige colour, and Roger studied the cut of the clothes, and felt their smooth texture. The expensive-looking shoes were square-toed. The man wore a bow tie, red and yellow, quite as colourful as anything which Al Maloney had boasted.

"Do you know what I think?" Mellish asked in a strained voice.

"That he's an American?"

"That's right."

Roger said: "I think I can tell you his name, too. Al Maloney. Or that's a name he sometimes used." He went down on one knee, and felt inside the man's pocket. He found a billfold in the hip pocket, loose change in others, an American-made watch, a cigar case, a book of matches with the words Hotel Commodore on them. He opened the billfold, and found some photographs, pound notes and dollar bills, and, printed in ink on the rough side of one of the sections, the name: A. Maloney.

There were three photographs: one of Francesca, identical with the one found in Kane's pocket, one of Mrs Liddel, and one of a woman whom Roger had never seen.

"Found what you want?" asked Mellish.

"Not yet, but I think it will help," Roger said. "We'd better have him taken to London and do a post-mortem there. Can you fix it?"

"Of course. Er—West, I know what you're thinking. I ought to have been on to this at once. I didn't give anything like it a thought." Mellish was obviously distressed.

"No reason why you should," said Roger quietly. "We were a long time getting round to it." He smiled tautly. "I wonder if this will make Francesca Liddel talk."

Francesca was in bed at the hospital, in a ground floor ward exactly the same as that in which Roger had been. She wore a fluffy pink bed-jacket and pink pyjamas. The rest had done her good, she showed no signs of the physical ordeal, except in her pale cheeks. Her pallor was partly due to the fact that she wore no make-up. The lack of make-up did not make her any the less strikingly beautiful. Her eyes were lovely, the smoothness of her cheeks and her complexion was almost too perfect to be real. She was sitting up on her pillows, reading a magazine, when she looked up to see Roger;

she started violently.

The magazine fell to the floor.

"Hallo," said Roger. "Better?"

"Yes—thank you."

"Good. We had a lucky break, thanks apparently to Al Maloney. Did you know he got away and raised the alarm?"

"Did he?" She spoke flatly, wary and watchful again; she was certainly in no mood to talk. Roger pulled up a chair and sat opposite her, offering cigarettes; she took one. Her fingers were quite steady.

"He did. Al Maloney is proving quite a friend of yours, isn't he? Why did you go to America to see him?"

She didn't answer.

"I know that you did," said Roger. "I think you went because you discovered that a certain Al Maloney was blackmailing your father, and you went to appeal for clemency. Lancelot Hay was party to the blackmail, but was sending the proceeds back to the States. Isn't that right?"

She drew deeply on the cigarette.

"Isn't it?" asked Roger. "And isn't it true that in the search, you found the Al I know, and he proved to be a very different Al Maloney. The man you wanted was much older, in the sixties."

Francesca said in a strained voice: "How do you know all this?"

"Because I've found the real Al Maloney."

She started again. "*Here*? In England?"

"Yes."

"Has he told you—" she broke off.

"Not yet. I'd rather you told me what it's about as far as you know. The rest will work itself out. The one certain thing is that the older Al Maloney will never be able to do any more harm; we've stopped all that."

She didn't speak, but it wasn't because of stubbornness. There were tears in her eyes, making them shine; tears of relief. Her lips quivered for a moment, the cigarette nearly dropped. She took it out quickly, and leaned back with her eyes closed. She looked superb. Her slender throat was creamy coloured, her wavy hair made a dark halo about the pillow. Her breast rose and fell as she breathed heavily under the strain of emotion – greater emotion than he could understand. It wasn't only relief.

She opened her eyes at last.

"Where did you find him?"

"It doesn't matter."

"All right," she said, "all right. I'll tell you what I can. Father was being blackmailed, and we discovered—"

"We?"

"Anthony and I. We discovered that it was being done through Lancelot, but that Lancelot was taking orders from this man Maloney. Maloney had been a friend of the family, years ago. Both of my mother and my father. He still writes to mother occasionally. I don't know how he discovered the truth —"

"What truth?"

"About my father's—other child."

Roger said: "Are you sure about that other child?"

"Of course I am." She put no emphasis into the words, just made a flat statement of fact. "It was the only flaw in a perfect life. He was—he *is* the most wonderful man I know. It was two years after their marriage—he was in Italy, and—well, it happened. He knew that if my mother discovered the truth, she would be, well, repelled; even after nearly thirty years, she would never understand or forgive. You can't—explain—love. And my father came to love mother deeply. Anthony and I found out about it, because Lancelot used another man, you mentioned him the other day. Kane. Then Kane started to blackmail me. That's why I let him use the flat. I went to America to try to plead with this man Maloney, because it was beginning to affect my father's health. He couldn't stand the strain, and the demands were getting more and more insistent – more and more money. He isn't wealthy, not really wealthy, it was beginning to affect him in every way."

There was one flaw in this, it wasn't easy to send money to America in these days of currency control; was she telling the whole truth?

"I went to plead," Francesca went on. "Anthony stayed behind to look after father."

"I thought they were on bad terms."

"No—that was because of mother. Mother didn't approve of Anthony, they never got on. Father was very understanding, there was no difficulty there. You must believe that."

"Yes, I can," said Roger.

"In America the first Maloney I found was—the man you know, Al." She closed her eyes again. "I knew he wasn't the man I'd gone to see, but he wouldn't leave me alone. You can guess why. He knew I was worried, wanted to help, but I wouldn't let him. I was still looking for the real Al Maloney when I heard about Lancelot's death and my father's arrest. I came straight home."

"Yes," said Roger.

"I hadn't told Al about it, didn't tell him why I had to leave. You see, I was—deeply in love with him."

Roger didn't speak.

"I was hardly in my right mind when I came back. The strain has been getting steadily worse for months; for nearly a year. Then I had this to face – father actually held on a charge of murder. And I could believe that he would kill Lancelot. Even now, I don't know whether he did. If ever a man deserved killing, it was Lancelot. I was beside myself, torn both ways. I didn't want Al, *my* Al, to know. I ought to have realised that there was no way of stopping it. I was frantic. Do you remember how I behaved when that photographer took a picture of me?"

"I remember."

"I was beside myself and—I've always hated being photographed. I lost my head. Then I saw a chance of talking to a man who might know

everything about your side of the case. The editor. As the police were there, I offered the cameraman money, I didn't want you to know that I just wanted to see the editor. He was—friendly. I didn't expect him to stop that photograph, but—well, he did. And he also confirmed what you'd made me believe – that father was likely to be convicted."

Roger was still nagged by a fear that she was keeping part, perhaps, the vital part, to herself.

"Miss Liddel," he said, "why did you tell me that your mother's life was in danger?"

She didn't answer.

"Whom did you suspect?"

She pressed her hand against her forehead and sat up a little. Even that slight movement had grace. She looked at him uncertainly, then raised her free hand.

No one.

"*What*?"

"No one," Francesca repeated. "I had to make you doubt whether father was guilty. I thought that if you had reason to think someone else was in danger, you would begin to look for another suspect, that it would help my father. I didn't think my mother was in any danger at all."

Roger allowed that to sink in, and then began to smile. She was staring intently, and when the smile made his lips curve, she began to relax. Before he spoke, she was smiling, as if she were really beginning to feel relief – and believed she had quite convinced him of the truth of this.

"Not bad at all," said Roger. "I fell for it completely. But the true word was spoken in jest again. Your mother *has* been attacked."

Francesca seemed appalled; incredulous.

All through the case, he had thought that Francesca was withholding part of the truth; and perhaps lying. He doubted if she had lied directly as much as he doubted whether she had told him everything. He was sure that the news about the attack on Mrs Liddel took her completely by surprise. She seemed almost to stop breathing. Through the silence he could hear his own breathing. Then she whispered: "Was it—the other—Maloney?"

"We're not sure who it was."

"Is she—all right?"

"She'll recover."

"What—happened—to her?"

"She was poisoned, with arsenic."

"Oh, no," whispered Francesca. "No!" The meaning of that, the probable truth that the killer of her cousin was still free, still alive, hit her as hard as anything had done. And she wasn't well; wasn't really well enough to take these shocks.

"We still don't know the whole truth," Roger said. "Do you think your father killed Lancelot? Or do you think that your brother—"

"Tony," she said. "Tony?" She closed her eyes again. "But —but—why

should he? Lancelot – he hated Lancelot, for what he was and what he had done. But mother—why should anyone want to kill her? *Why?"*

"Perhaps because she knew the murderer."

"But she thought it was my father!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, yes! She told you it was impossible, but when I went to see her she was bitter—hateful. Tony and I were there together. She blamed father for everything, cursed him for bringing the shame to her. I think she hated him. She seemed so sure that it was he, she couldn't—" Francesca broke off.

Roger said gently: "What you're saying isn't evidence and can't be used against you or anyone, you know. Let everything come."

"I've told you now," she said.

"Everything?"

"Yes. Everything that matters. You know why I went to see Kane, and what hold he had over me. I've told you what happened at the cottage."

He watched her, and marvelled that she was still self-controlled. Her face was ghastly in its pallor, and she held her body rigid.

"You haven't told me two things," Roger said quietly.

What—are—they?"

"About the documents Kane came to find. Hadn't he asked for them before, hadn't he tried to make you give them up?"

"Not me. He'd talked to Tony. Tony didn't tell me what they were. I'm not even sure that he knew. I'd never heard of any documents. I think that talk of them was a complete puzzle to me."

It was easy to believe her; but it might be folly.

"What else do you want to know?" she asked.

"Why did you lie about not recognising Kane at your flat when he came to see you?"

She raised her hands resignedly.

"All right, I lied. Yes, it was Kane, and he wasn't disguised. He demanded the documents, and we said we hadn't got them. Kane went wild and hit Tony, knocked him out. I—I screamed, and he turned on me—he had to keep me quiet. He began to search, and the front door bell rang- Kane pulled down his hat and raised his scarf and went out."

"Why not tell me at the cottage, if that's all?"

"Kane was blackmailing us about father's other son."

"That wasn't it—you knew we'd find that out."

"I—I thought it would harm my father."

He knew that she had lied smoothly and plausibly before. So she might be lying now.

"What about those documents Kane wanted?"

"I just don't know anything about them."

He didn't believe her.

"What about that sack he put over your head?"

"I—I invented it."

No wonder he didn't believe her now!

“If this is everything, I still don’t see why you didn’t talk when I found you at the cottage. Why did you think you could do any good by keeping silent?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” asked Francesca. “I was frightened. I *am* frightened. The old Maloney was still free. That man has been a cloud of menace. Thought and fear of him has guided nearly everything I’ve done for the past year. I was afraid of what he might do. I *am* afraid. I did exactly what he told me, through Kane; and he told me not to talk. I believe he was listening at the cottage and so—I didn’t talk.”

Roger said: “This man from London who questioned you. Wasn’t it Maloney?”

“No.”

“Did you recognise him?”

“I’d never seen him before, he was a complete stranger. He told me that he employed Kane. He knew everything that Kane and old Maloney did, and I believed him. He was a short man, stocky, rather sallow. Not English—well, he didn’t look English, but his voice was English. I swear I’ve never seen him before.”

“And he asked for these documents?”

“Yes.”

Roger leaned forward. “Miss Liddel, the life and death of your father, perhaps your brother, possibly Al Maloney and your mother, may depend on the truth being discovered soon. Be careful when you answer, remember what might happen if you lie. Do you know what documents these are?”

“No!” she cried.

“Do you think Tony does?”

“I don’t think so, I’m not sure. He—”

She broke off, looking away. Was she lying? He didn’t know, and was trying to judge when he saw the look of horror which froze her features. It was as sudden as a lightning flash. He glanced round and saw the face at the window, saw the gun levelled towards Francesca.

23

SHORT, DARK MAN

It came so swiftly, without warning – sudden menace with the shadow of death. Roger caught a glimpse of the man, jumped up, thrust out his hand, and pushed Francesca back on to the pillows. He grabbed his chair and flung it at the window. He saw the flash of flame and heard the roar of the shot. Then the chair crashed into the window, glass smashed and flew.

The man disappeared.

Roger pushed at the window, but pieces of glass were sticking out of the edges; he couldn't get through quickly, and the man out there could see him clearly against the light. He darted to one side, and called: "Get under the bed. Get under the bed!"

Another shot roared, farther away; the bullet hit the wall above Francesca's head. Roger didn't see whether she was moving, didn't know whether she was hurt. He stretched out a hand to try to open the window; it was of the sash cord type, and he couldn't get sufficient pressure on it. He swung round.

Francesca was falling on to her knees, at the side of the bed.

Someone came hurrying outside.

Roger opened the door, pushed past a nurse, and looked towards the left. A window at the end of the passage was slightly open, and he could see the garden beyond. He reached it and thrust it up. He heard another shot, and saw the flash, at least fifty yards away. He was still a good target, but the gunman might not be looking towards him. He climbed out and dropped flat. Someone was shouting in alarm not far away, and there were other confused sounds. A passing motorist had the sense to switch on his headlights. They lit up the hospital grounds and showed a short man running towards the railings, which bordered a side street. The man had given up hope of killing Francesca, and was fleeing for his life.

Roger raced towards the railings. He was nearer a gate than the man with the gun, and reached the pavement. The motorist who had switched on his headlights had slowed down, and was almost at a standstill.

"What—?" he began, out of the window.

"Police—get that man!"

The headlights bathed the man who had fired at the girl. He was climbing over the railings. He jumped down, turned away from the car, and began to run.

Roger jumped on to the running board.

"He's armed. Careful."

"Want me to—"

"Get after him." Roger clung to the door, as the car put on speed. Not far away from it he could see the man's legs, moving like pistons. He saw the

man turn, and steeled himself for the shot. It came, and missed. The car was now only a few yards behind the gunman, who turned and fired point blank at the driver.

Nothing happened.

"No ammo!" the driver shouted, and swung his wheel. "And look!"

Police were coming from the other end of the road.

The man with the gun hesitated, then turned and doubled back, running in front of the car. It was slowing down, but couldn't stop quickly enough. Roger felt the impact. The man seemed to fling himself against the radiator. His face was grotesquely plain in the headlights, then disappeared into shadows.

The wheels crunched over his body.

The driver, shaken, stood by the side of the man, and muttered: "He's dead."

"It's what he asked for."

"He practically flung himself at me! I couldn't help it!"

"I know, don't worry. Nip across to the hospital, will you, tell them what's happened, and ask them to bring a stretcher over here, right away. Then get yourself a drink." The man went off, and others drew up, among them a policeman. Roger said: "Look after things, constable, and don't touch the body, don't let anyone else touch it, except the stretcher-bearers from the hospital. All clear?"

"Yes, sir."

Roger took another look at the dead man's face. He'd seen it at the window, the man had made no attempt to hide it. Round, sallow, with dark hair, broad features – an un-English face. He answered the description of Smith who had rented the cottage. There was no doubt about that. Roger went off, and reached the hospital as the stretcher was brought out. The driver was with the orderlies.

"I'll support your statement to the constable," Roger said. "Tell him I'm West of the Yard." He went in at the front entrance, and forced himself to go steadily. It seemed an age before he reached the ward.

Francesca was back in bed. She was deathly pale, and her eyes looked like burning glass, but she wasn't hurt. Two nurses were with her, and one was holding a cup in front of her mouth.

She pushed it aside.

"The man from London?" Roger asked.

"Yes," she said, gaspingly. "Yes!"

"You needn't worry now," Roger said. "There's no more danger for you."

He hoped she would believe it, that he sounded as if he meant it. He was sure that the man had tried to kill her to prevent her from talking; surely nothing could stop that, now. Smith had believed that she could tell him what was in the mysterious documents.

He said: "Now what is the whole truth, Miss Liddel?"

She just stared at him, and refused to talk again. He left her with the familiar, nagging disquiet more persistent than ever.

He felt almost frightened, because he began to realise that he had not yet glimpsed the secret truth.

Roger telephoned Janet, told her nothing about the shooting, and found her talkative; she had just returned from a theatre, with Mark. The police were watching the house, and a neighbour had been sitter-in. Cheerfully, Roger replaced the receiver.

He spent half an hour with Mellish, stayed the night at The George Hotel and, with a complete report on the dead man, the bullet from the old Maloney's head, and all papers from Smith's pockets in his own case, drove back to London early next morning. He was at the Yard soon after eleven o'clock. In twenty minutes he knew that the bullet which had killed the elderly American had been fired from the gun which Kane had used at Bell Street and at Hampstead.

Sloan told him there was no trace of Anthony Liddel.

"Begins to look as if he's one of our birds," Sloan said. "What happened at Stamford? Someone who didn't like you, or didn't like Francesca?"

"Both. I think she was to be silenced—and I'm beginning to think that the shooting at Bell Street was for Maloney's benefit, not mine. The gunmen thought Francesca had told him everything."

"Had she?"

"No. And I doubt if she knows everything. Is the Old Man in?"

"I think so," said Sloan. "What's on your mind, Roger?"

Roger said: "A little bit of hell."

Chatworth was not only in, but anxious to see him. He actually stood up when Roger entered, rounded the desk, and shook hands. Then he offered cigarettes, and said gruffly that he wasn't able to approve of his senior officers being shot at so often.

Roger forced a grin.

"It's time I took young Maloney's advice, I think."

"About what?"

"Toting a gun."

"If you want one, take one," said Chatworth. "But didn't you get the man who fired at Miss Liddel?"

"He got himself." Roger went into details, and began to lay the things taken from the dead man's pocket on Chatworth's table. He didn't try to anticipate Chatworth's reaction to what he was going to say. "There isn't much more here, sir—identity card in the name of Smith and, I think, a forged one. Oddments such as stamps, a penknife, cheap watch—nothing which really helps us to find out much about him. I telephoned particulars last night, and his fingerprints are here by now, we'll soon know whether he has a record. I doubt it."

"No farther ahead?" asked Chatworth.

"I wouldn't say that. I think we now know the real situation where Francesca Liddel ind her Al Maloney are concerned. I wouldn't like to go any farther. The case is now turning on the nature of these wanted

documents and the identity of the people who want them. Kane, clearly, was only an agent. Maloney – the dead Maloney – was also an agent, I think. Lancelot Hay started as a nasty piece of work and became an agent. When the pressure really hotted up, and Liddel was being pressed to give up these mysterious documents, Hay was killed. No one had bumped him off while he was dealing with money, but once the documents came into it, killing started."

Cbatworth's bushy eyebrows seemed to meet together.

"Meaning?"

"Just what I say, sir – the documents now prove to be the crucial factor. Where are they, what are they, and who wants them? We could believe that Anthony Liddel, say, would risk a lot to save himself from being caught and hanged, but this Mr Smith got himself killed. It almost looked as if he took the trouble to make sure that he couldn't be properly identified! I'm taking it for granted that Smith isn't his real name. I think he took the case out of its present level to a much higher one. Or lower."

Chatworth grunted.

Roger said formally: "I hope I needn't labour the point, sir. We've felt there was something odd about this from the beginning. It was never the straightforward murder of a blackmailer. We know that now. Some of the people concerned are prepared to kill rather than be caught and questioned. They've plenty of money – they were able to buy the allegiance of the farmer and his son, up north; able to buy Kane's allegiance; able to make Lancelot Hay do what they wanted. They want certain documents, and will do murder simply to make sure that no one who might know what the documents are should be able to explain to us. That is all clear, isn't it?"

"As crystal."

"Four questions need answering now," Roger said. He was brisk, almost abrupt. "Where are the papers? Who has the papers? What are they? Who wants them? And I think we could safely guess at the last answer, now."

"Although you don't like guessing," growled Chatworth.

"Sometimes it's necessary."

"Well, guess."

Roger shrugged. "Agents of a foreign power. Spies." He gave a short laugh. "It's time we consulted Intelligence about this – and time we took another look at James Liddel's history. Past time! Until recently, he was a highly placed Civil Servant, working at the Foreign Office. I've had that at the back of my mind all the time. What we now need is to find out what documents Liddel had access to before he retired, and whether there's any leakage from the department he controlled. Not my job, sir, but the quicker we can get the information, the better."

Chatworth sniffed.

"Yes," he said. "I'll go over to the FO myself. Want to come?"

"I'd rather stick to my own end of it," said Roger.

"Doing what? Seeing James Liddel again?"

"No, that can come when we know the answer from the Foreign Office.

There's Anthony's part to find out, and the motive for the attack on his mother."

"Assuming that he poisoned her?"

"That someone did – presumably, just because she knows or might know the truth about these documents. Sloan tells me she's off the danger list, but we're not allowed to question her yet. Her own doctor will postpone that as long as he can, but we may have to override him. This might not stand delay, we have to find those documents."

"Ah," said Chatworth. "I wondered when you were coming to that. Think Anthony Liddel has them?"

Roger could only shrug.

He went across to Cannon Row where Kane was still held, but the man resisted all efforts to get him talking, although he showed some signs of nervousness when Roger talked of documents. Roger watched him, closely. The spell in jail hadn't yet had any weakening effect on the man's nerves, but the wearing process was only beginning. It wanted some sudden shock to make that process work much more quickly.

Kane, smoking a cigarette, sat on a hard chair on the other side of the small table with which all cells were equipped. He didn't speak. Roger put his hand to his pocket and drew out a photograph, face downwards. Kane's gaze fell towards it, then lifted again, immediately. Roger kept the picture face downwards.

"We know you were being employed by someone, Kane. If you want to save your neck, you'd better tell us who it was.

''You can't hang me," Kane sneered.

"Think not? You'll change your mind when you know what we've found in Smith's cottage. Why kill Maloney?"

Kane started.

Roger grinned. "Beginning to see daylight? Why kill a bald-headed American on a lonely English farm?"

Now Kane was really shaken.

"It's a lie!"

Roger turned the photograph over; it was of the old Maloney, taken after death.

"Recognise him?"

Kane stared at it, as if hypnotised; and his lips began to work. He made a curious little sound with them, and then his hands rubbed together with a sliding noise. It made the quiet of the police station seem more intense. Kane wouldn't look up, just stared at the picture – and from the picture, he could see that the American was dead, and see how he had died.

Roger said: "The bullet in his head was fired from the gun you used when you fired at me, Kane."

"I didn't kill him!"

"Then who did?"

Roger said: "Ever seen him before?" and flashed a photograph of the dead

Smith out of his pocket. Kane caught sight of it, blanched, and jumped to his feet. His nerves couldn't stand the strain any longer, he began to tremble violently, and his teeth were chattering.

"He must have killed Maloney! He was at the cottage, he met Maloney there alone. I was in London. I can prove I was in London. Smith must have killed him. He gave me the gun afterwards!"

"Smith?" Roger barked.

"That man."

"He doesn't look like a Smith. Who is he?"

Kane almost screamed: "I don't know! But he brought me into it. I wouldn't have touched it if he hadn't. I was broke, he staked me. He must have killed Maloney. I tell you I didn't know Maloney was dead!"

"Tell me some more. What documents were you after?"

"I don't know!" cried Kane, but his eyes said he was lying.

"So you still pretend you don't know what was in them?"

"I didn't kill Maloney, and—but *look*! Smith's dead—that's a dead man's face." He clutched his throat. "*Who killed him*?"

Roger said: "His employers don't take much account of a life here and there. They sacrificed him and Maloney. They'll sacrifice you and anyone else if they think it's worth it. Who was Smith working for, Kane?"

"I tell you I don't know." Kane shouted the words, then swung round, staggered to the bed in the corner, and dropped down on it. He held his hands in front of his face. His nerve had broken as suddenly as a cut string, and he couldn't stop himself from trembling. "He brought me into it, he staked me, he let me make everything I could, on the side. But I didn't kill anyone, you can't hang me!"

"You'll be surprised," said Roger, and went out.

He walked across the Yard towards the Civil Police building, and when he was going through the passages, Eddie Day called out:

"Handsome!"

"Hallo, Eddie."

"The AC wants to see you. Quick."

"Thanks," said Roger. He didn't hurry, but was at the Assistant Commissioner's office in less than five minutes. He tapped and went in. His mind was full of Kane and the man's complete collapse – but emptied of that when he saw Chatworth's face. The Assistant Commissioner was seldom so sombre as he looked now.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Yes. Roger, are you sure you've got the right end of the stick?"

"I think so, sir."

"I'm not so sure. I've been talking to the Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office. I don't like being laughed at. Liddel left everything in perfect order. Nothing at all is missing. Nothing. Still sure?"

24

THE LOVERS

"What-ho, Handsome," said Eddie Day genially. "Still got the same bee in your bonnet? You've been going around for a week with a face as long as a month of Sundays. You want to cheer up – Liddel's not the only fish in the sea."

"That's right," said Roger.

Eddie, who had met him outside his office, grinned broadly, and looked more like a predatory fish than ever.

"What's right? You haven't got the bee in your bonnet, or Liddel's not the only fish in the sea?"

"Yes," said Roger. "I'll be seeing you."

Eddie Day found himself looking at the closed door.

Sloan was in the office.

"You're earlier than I expected," he said.

It was not, in fact, seven days since Chatworth had been so decisively reassured by the Foreign Office; it was only five. In that time, Liddel had been up for a second hearing, and remanded again for eight days, after formal evidence; the hearing had been over in forty minutes. In that time every trail had petered out. Anthony Liddel was still missing. Kane had signed a statement admitting that he had received orders from Smith, but declaring that he did not know for whom Smith worked. A verdict of murder against some person or persons unknown had been returned at the inquest on Aloysius Conway Maloney of New York City – and the American Consular official who had held a watching brief had made no comment. There was no further identification of Smith; it had been discovered that he lived in a Kensington boarding-house, had been there for nearly two years, and as far as his landlady had known, he was a commercial traveller. He had always been a most secretive man. Except that the place where he sometimes ate had been found, there was no other information. A formal verdict of suicide had been returned at the Stamford inquest on him. The press had been there in force, but had been disappointed of sensation.

Francesca was back in London, at her own flat.

Young Al Maloney was still at her brother's flat.

Mrs Liddel had almost recovered. Neither she nor her husband had made any further statement. She had not admitted that her son had visited her on the morning that she had been found ill. No trace of arsenic was found in her room, but she had undoubtedly taken arsenic and, but for the prompt attention, she would probably have died.

James Liddel retained his almost unnatural composure; since the shock he'd received at mention of the name Maloney, he had given no sign that Roger had found helpful.

According to Kane, he had seen Lancelot Hay several times, and Hay had shown great cunning in blackmailing his uncle. Kane obviously believed that Liddel had murdered his nephew; and there was still no definite evidence against that. On the other hand, Gabriel Potter and the counsel he briefed would undoubtedly use the illness of Mrs Liddel as a strong pointer to the probability that the real murderer was still at large.

Neither of the Harrings had been found, but it was now evident that they had let the cottage to Smith, and had done what they had been told, saying nothing and accepting payment.

"Look here, Roger," Sloan said, "you're letting this get on your mind too much. Liddel will probably be found not guilty, and as you doubt whether he killed the man, what's your quarrel with that? We're bound to find Anthony Liddel before long, it's only a matter of time."

Roger shrugged.

"Not enough time, Bill. I still don't believe the simple blackmail story, but I can't see beyond it since the Foreign Office fiasco. Smith, Kane, and the Harrings weren't really interested in Liddel's sullied past. They wanted a hold on him, and they wanted these documents. We're still stuck. I don't like it, because there might be a lot that we don't know. I suppose the Foreign Office could have been fooled."

Sloan made no comment.

Roger chuckled.

"You don't believe it, and no one believes it. You think this story of the documents was just a red-herring, that we struck a blackmailing gang, and they died out with Smith – unless libertine Anthony was in it, and it will finally die out with him. Nice and tidy, but not true."

"I've never known you so obstinate," Sloan said slowly. "There isn't even a real dead end, except young Liddel – no inquiries are outstanding."

"Except one."

"What's that?"

"We've never had an answer from New York about our murdered Maloney."

"That simply means they've no useful information," said Sloan. "They wouldn't hold out on us."

"The next step," said Roger, "is to advise me to take a holiday. Chatworth was on the point of it earlier. Any news of Francesca and her Al today?"

"Yes," said Sloan, and smiled faintly. "They spent the morning at the Zoo, had lunch at Les Gourmets in Greek Street, and repaired to Hillcourt Mews at about three o'clock. They've spent practically every minute together since she got back. Why they don't get married, I can't understand."

"Delicacy – they've got to wait until the verdict," said Roger. "I think I'll look them up."

Sloan didn't speak.

The telephone bell rang. "Yes, what is it?" Sloan asked. Roger glanced through some reports on his desk, none of them to do with the Liddel case. As always at a time of stress his desk was scrupulously neat. He noticed the

change in Sloan's tone, and looked up. "Yes, send it along right away," Sloan said. "As soon as it's decoded."

He put the receiver down.

"Well?" asked Roger.

"There's a long cable in from New York. In code. It contains the name Maloney," said Sloan.

Roger felt his nerves tingling as he took the decoded cable. Sloan leaned over his shoulder. The clerk who had brought it in closed the door with a snap. Roger began to read, and Sloan exclaimed: "Well, well!" They read on:

> "Highly confidential report on Aloysius Conway Maloney. Aged sixty-one American citizen British origin suspected espionage 1943-1945 interned released September 1945 out of country nine months watched on return known to associate with unfriendly aliens interrogated prior Alger Hiss trial released due lack of evidence closely watched Federal Bureau Investigation known associates British and other aliens remained suspected espionage left New York five weeks ago destination supposed Texas no further trace this side reported found dead England advise close check identity marks two inch dark brown mole right breast, little finger left hand three-eighths inch shorter than right hand fingerprints being radioed request comparison and confirmation identity earliest."

"So you weren't wrong." Sloan gave an excited little chuckle. "I wonder what the AC will think when he sees that. I should take it to him right away."

"Not until I've compared those fingerprints," said Roger. "Sit on them, will you, compare them as soon as they come in, and if I'm not back, telephone me at Hillcourt Mews."

"So you're going there?"

"I'm just in the mood to discuss matters with a man named Maloney," said Roger.

Al Maloney opened the door wide, and gave a mock bow. He looked fit and buoyant. He was dressed in a dark grey suit, and his tie obviously hadn't been bought in a $1 Tie Shop, it had more the look of Burlington Arcade. His blond hair was plastered down, which made his features seem thinner and gave him an almost aggressive look, but there was that indefinable, likeable quality about him as he ushered Roger into the big living room.

Francesca was sitting in an armchair. "Look what the luck's sent us," said Maloney. "Sit down, Chief Inspector." Francesca stood up.

Whatever secret worries she might have, whatever burden weighed on her shoulders, she laid them both. She looked lovelier than Roger had ever seen her. She held out her hand; it was cool and firm. He stood back, and

studied her; the flawless complexion, the fine, glowing eyes, the graceful carriage were all worth looking at.

"Yes, I'm a lucky man," Maloney said. "You couldn't be more welcome, Chief Inspector, we wanted to tell the world, and you'll do for a start. Isn't that so, Frankie?"

Francesca smiled; beauty became more beautiful.

"Meaning what?" asked Roger.

"My gay bachelor days are over," said Maloney, "and that goes for Frankie, too. There ought to be champagne!"

"What inspired this?" asked Roger dryly. "The birds of paradise or the chimpanzees?"

Maloney roared.

"You're good! I'll tell you, West, it was in the Aquarium. Frankie agrees with me, though, your Zoo can't compare with Central Park for romance."

"Do you have to have us watched, wherever we go?" asked Francesca, quietly. "Aren't you satisfied with what we've told you now?"

"Even if I were, I'd still have you watched."

"I suppose you think that Tony will get in touch with us," Francesca said. She was serious now, but did not give him the impression that she was deeply worried. "I don't think he will, he'll be afraid that you'll be watching all the time." She sat down again, slowly. "Are you going through with my father's trial? If you want to arrest Tony, how can you continue to harass my father?"

"They could have conspired together."

Francesca said: "The trouble is that you don't really know them. I don't think either of them killed Lancelot, and I don't believe that Tony tried to kill my mother. He might kill in a fit of rage, he'd never use poison. Poison isn't a weapon my father would use, either. Don't you take things like that into consideration?"

"Yes, and weigh it up against the fact that arsenic was used and your father bought some," Roger said.

"Do we have to go right on with this?" asked Maloney, grimacing. "Frankie's tired of it, and so am I. We don't think you can make your case against James Liddel; we're preparing a grand welcome-home party. Go away and leave us in peace."

Roger smiled.

"I thought I might jog your memory again. Sure you've never met the older Maloney?"

"You bet I'm sure," said Maloney. "I owe that guy one big debt, and I wish I could pay it. If Frankie hadn't gone to New York looking for him, she would never have fallen into my arms." He laughed; his good spirits seemed undaunted. "Frankie agrees with me, it's almost worth what happened to her at that cottage."

Roger said: "I doubt it. Miss Liddel—"

"Oh, forget it," Maloney said. "Go and think it over and come back some other day."

"Miss Liddel, I'm sorry to harp on a distasteful matter, but you knew, didn't you, that your father was blackmailed because of a son born out of wedlock?"

"Knew? She told you about it," said Maloney.

"Of course," Francesca said.

"Have you ever heard what happened to this son?"

"No."

"Do you know how old he'd be?"

"Yes. Twenty-eight."

"Did you ever discuss what happened to him, with your father?"

"Only briefly."

"When was that?"

"After I had discovered about the blackmail. My father told me the story, then. The child was adopted – he did not tell me by whom. He paid the foster parents well, a lump sum. He has never heard from them since."

It seemed so completely true and reasonable; and Roger felt that it was wrong. He sensed the contentment in these two people; was convinced that if one freak of mischance came off, that they were brother and sister, there would be despair and misery for them both. Yet – was it an outside chance? The old Maloney had known the Liddels many years ago. It was at least possible that the old Maloney had been the foster parent. That would explain how he had known about it.

Francesca said sharply: "What are you thinking about?"

"Coincidences," said Roger. "Are you sure you haven't heard from your brother since he disappeared?"

"I am quite sure."

"You've no idea where he is?"

Maloney intervened in a quiet voice. "West, we've given plenty of thought to that, I guess. We've agreed that it's possible that Tony killed himself. We think that maybe he killed Lancelot and is afraid of it being proved against him. Francesca has kind of made up her mind that she'll learn about that one day."

"I doubt it," Roger said.

"Why?" Francesca's voice was sharp. "Have you heard more about him?"

"Not yet. But if he killed himself, he wouldn't do it so that no one could find his body. Murderers sometimes hide bodies for a while, suicides seldom. Bodies always turn up, Miss Liddel. And if he killed himself, it would be as a confession – his death would practically prove his father's innocence. So I don't think you have to worry about suicide. Did he have any friends you haven't told us about?"

"No."

"There's a time to stop guessing," Maloney said. "That's mostly all you've done. You only guess about James Liddel. You only guess that Tony went to see his mother and poisoned her. Your guesses get woollier and woollier each time. Take my advice and turn them in. I—"

The telephone bell rang. Maloney moved across the room and picked it

up. He looked at Francesca, and his eyes glowed; as if he worshipped her. Probably, he did. That coincidence rankled in Roger's mind; fear, for these two; and for much else.

"Yeah?" said Maloney, into the telephone, and then added: "Sure, he's right here. For you, West."

"Thanks."

It was Bill Sloan.

"Take it easy, Roger," Sloan said, an obvious warning that good news was coming. "We've had the old Maloney's prints in. They're the same as the dead man's, no doubt about his identity – he was the suspected spy."

Roger said casually: "I see, go on."

"Then we've had a message from Nurse James – you remember, the nurse we had with Mrs Liddel. She was taken off that duty yesterday, as arranged."

It was more difficult to make a casual reply. "Yes?" Roger knew that Francesca and Maloney were watching him closely. Maloney moved across the room and rested a hand on Francesca's shoulder.

"She says she's been teased by something at Maybury Crescent all the time, and couldn't think what it was, so couldn't report it," Sloan went on. "Now she thinks she's seen a glimmering. There was a visitor that morning – the morning of the arsenic poisoning. It was a man. Maisie denied having seen anyone, but let the truth out in an odd phrase, the same evening. Nurse James took it in, but didn't spot the significance at the time. The phrase was 'he'll be back', and she was talking to the cook. But the evidence that a young man with fair hair called at the back door that morning comes from a window cleaner who was doing a house opposite the back door. Nurse James remembered this window cleaner, saw him in the district again, and spoke to him. Anthony Liddel had been there all right, and Maisie the maid lied."

"I see." Roger was looking blankly out of the window, and hoping that he wasn't showing his fierce excitement. He wondered whether Sloan had already seen the full significance of this.

"That means Maisie and the cook were prepared to lie about Anthony's visit – he had them where he wanted them. You might get plenty out of them if you have a go."

"That's all?"

"Isn't it enough?"

Roger smiled faintly; he wanted to grin like a Cheshire cat.

"Not quite. I'll be seeing you, Bill."

He rang off. The others still watched him closely, sensing the sensation. He ran his fingers through his hair, and took out cigarettes. He was thinking: Maisie said 'he'll be back.' It's the last place I thought of looking, but Tony's at the Liddel's house in Maybury Crescent or I'm a Dutchman. The servants are hiding him.

"You're looking smug," Maloney said. "Guessing again?" Roger said: "I guess so," laughed, and went out.

25

TOP FLOOR

Roger pulled up alongside a telephone kiosk, round the corner, and telephoned Sloan again.

"I'll be with you in twenty minutes," he said. "Meanwhile, have the watch on 11 Maybury Crescent doubled, back and front. It must be unobtrusive."

"Right."

"I'll want a word with Nurse James as soon as I get in," Roger said, and rang off.

He sat at the wheel, watching the passing traffic, picturing the house at Maybury Crescent and the timid, flat-chested Maisie. He laughed suddenly, and a man stared at him as he let in the clutch and drove off.

Sloan and Nurse James were in his office. In plain clothes the woman looked attractive in a severe way; she was anxious and apologetic.

"I'm extremely sorry, sir, but I just didn't realise whom Maisie might mean when she said that to the cook. It wasn't until I left the house and was thinking over it, that I wondered if it was significant. There's no doubt she used the words 'he'll be back' – and it almost certainly referred to Anthony Liddel. Maisie was very fond of him – so was the cook. I could kick myself."

"You've done all right," Roger said. "Make a detailed statement, covering everything that you noticed and overheard at the house. Have it ready first thing tomorrow morning."

"Yes, sir, of course."

"Thanks," said Roger, and sent her off.

Sloan, who'd sat at the desk throughout this, stifled a yawn. It was a little after four-thirty.

"Tired?" Roger looked bursting with vitality.

"I've been sitting here too much – I've hardly moved since I came back," said Sloan.

"Plenty of opportunity to dream about Switzerland's pretty chalets," said Roger. "You're going to do something tonight. I wouldn't take anyone else on this job if I were paid for it. I'd like Burnaby, too."

"What's brewing?"

"A raid on the Liddels' house, after dark. I've still Maisie's back-door key. If they have no warning, they won't be able to cover up, and I fancy we'll find Anthony living a life of luxury, and a lot of other things."

"You'll want a search warrant."

"Chatworth won't argue about that." Roger picked up the cable from New York, the radioed and the Yard pictures of the elder Maloney's fingerprints, and went out. He felt a curious buoyancy, yet was on edge, seeing a vision which might yet prove the truth. Yet some of the details were vague; the faces of some who were guilty.

He banged more loudly than usual on Chatworth's door.

"I'm not deaf," growled Chatworth.

"Sorry, sir." Roger was brief. He went across to the desk and put the papers down. "Interesting news from the United States."

Chatworth looked at him suspiciously, and then read; he nodded several times, grunted, pushed back his chair, and said gruffly: "Pity. It'll make you more swollen-headed than ever. We've still no proof that this is espionage, and the Foreign Office—"

"I'd like a search warrant for 11 Maybury Crescent again," Roger said. "There's reason to suspect that Anthony Liddel is hiding there. When we've seen him, we may have all the proof we want."

"Oh," said Chatworth. He relaxed. "When are you going?"

"After dark."

"Be careful," said Chatworth. "Have you started carrying a gun yet?"

"I will tonight," Roger promised. "Sloan and Burnaby will be with me. I'll be happier if they're armed, too."

"All right," said Chatworth. "Here, wait a minute. What's on your mind? What makes you think the Foreign Office could make that kind of mistake?"

"There's one way of stealing documents without taking them away," said Roger, and left Chatworth puzzling that out. He went back to the office, took out a piece of plain paper, and printed several words carefully. Sloan didn't notice what he was doing. He put the note in a plain envelope, sealed it, and printed the name and address. Then he rang for a messenger.

"Have that delivered to 11 Maybury Crescent at once," he said.

Sloan looked up. "Now what?"

"Just an anonymous letter," Roger said. "This case started with some!"

The night was perfect for the raid. A steady wind blew, there was a drizzle of rain, and heavy clouds hid the stars. The lamp lighting in Maybury Crescent wasn't good. Roger stopped his car at the end of the street. Burnaby and Sloan went round to the back, while Roger had a word with one of the two men on duty.

"Anyone gone in or come out?" Roger asked.

"Two ladies called about six o'clock, and stayed for three-quarters of an hour – they've called before. Friends of Mrs Liddel, I believe, sir." The watching detective was very precise.

"Anyone else?"

"Nothing seen from here, sir."

"Thanks. I'll be going in at the back. We've more men at each end of the street. If anyone comes out in a hurry, don't take unnecessary chances. He might be armed and ready to use his gun."

"Right, sir."

Roger went round the back. Sloan had talked to the watchers there. The cook had been out for twenty minutes, apparently just for a walk, and had been back for an hour. Maisie hadn't left during the day. The light was now on in the maid's parlour; it was after eight-thirty, probably they had finished

work for the night. The parlour, Roger knew, led off the kitchen; it was possible to get in without being noticed – and to go to the main part of the house.

"Warned them what might happen?" Roger asked.

"All set," said Sloan.

"Good. Burnaby, let's gThe three men walked to the back entrance of Number 11. The parlour light showed at the sides and the top of the curtains; there were no other lights showing at the back of the house.

Roger reached the back door first, and took out Maisie's key. He could hear nothing except the bated breathing of his men. He inserted the key cautiously, twisted, and pushed. The door opened without a sound.

It was darker inside than out.

Roger went in, cautiously. There was nothing in his way. He waited until his eyes were accustomed to the gloom, then opened the door which led to the front of the house. Just to the left there was light coming from beneath a door – that of the maids' parlour. This light was sufficient to show them the furniture in the kitchen, and the passage which led to the front hall. There was another light on, but it was dim; probably on the first floor landing.

Roger found the handle of the parlour door.

He thrust the door open.

Maisie was sitting at one side of the fireplace. The cook, a bigger woman but just as flat-chested, had her back to the door. Maisie gave a stifled shriek, and jumped up, dropping a stocking she was mending. The cook jerked her head round.

"Just keep quiet," Roger said. He slipped into the room and Sloan followed him. Burnaby closed the door and stood on guard outside. Neither of the women spoke, but stared at the two detectives, Maisie's mouth wide open, the cook's closed tightly.

"Well, Maisie," Roger said heavily, "who told you to lie to the police?"

Maisie raised her hands.

"You've no right—"

"I've every right. Is Mr Anthony upstairs now?"

Maisie didn't answer, but dropped into her chair and began to tremble violently. The cook muttered under her breath. Then Maisie began to cry, softly – the sobs wracked her body. She covered her face with her hands, and didn't look up.

"Yes, he is," die cook said thinly. "On the top floor."

Roger made them put on their outdoor clothes, and sent them out, with Burnaby, to the nearest police car. After a few hours waiting at Scotland Yard they would probably be ready to talk. The cook kept a sullen silence now, and Maisie was crying quietly.

Burnaby came back, while Roger and Sloan were still downstairs.

"All okay, sir!"

"All right, here we go," said Roger. "We'll listen outside Mrs Liddel's door. If there's no one talking, you'll stay on guard there, and we'll go up."

"Yes, sir." Burnaby swallowed his disappointment.

Roger stopped at the half-landing and opened the door of the darkroom. He switched on the light; everything was as he had last seen it; Mrs Liddel had not taken up her hobby again.

He sensed the others' impatience.

"We're not due until nine o'clock," he said.

Neither of the others spoke.

Roger led the way upstairs, tense, expectant. The landing light was on, and showed all the doors, including that of Mrs Liddel's room. No light glowed at the edges of that door. They stood outside it, but heard nothing.

"Asleep, probably," Burnaby said.

"Stay here, and be careful," Roger said.

With Sloan, he looked in each of the bedrooms; they were empty. Liddel's small library had a stale smell, as if the door hadn't been opened for weeks. That done, they went to the foot of the second flight of stairs, leading to the top floor and the maids' quarters. These stairs were carpeted, but they creaked. Roger walked up by the wall to lessen the squeaking. They reached another landing, and saw a light beneath a door which was immediately opposite.

"Think he has it locked?" Sloan whispered.

"Could have." Roger approached the door, and turned the handle. Before he tried to thrust the door open, he heard a voice, a woman's voice.

"Yes, *I know*," she said.

Roger didn't recognise her voice; he hadn't reckoned on Anthony Liddel having company. He waited for Liddel's reply, and there was none.

"*I've known all the time*," the woman said. Her voice was pitched so low that it lost all its identity; it was just a voice, and there was only one emotion in it: deadly malice. Even through the closed door, that sounded clearly.

"*All the time*," she repeated.

A man exclaimed: "*You devil*!"

"Words won't help you," the woman said. "*Tell me where those papers are, Tony*."

So the man *was* Anthony Liddel.

"*Tell me where they are*," the woman said, "*or it will be the worse for you*." The simple words increased that feeling of deadliness. Here was a woman who knew exactly what she wanted, and who was threatening; and a man who was frightened. They could sense that.

"*I—I don't know*!" Liddel said at last. "*Get away. Put that gun away*."

"*No*," the woman said. "*If you don't tell me at once, I shall shoot you where it will be very painful*." She laughed; the laugh had an edge to it. "*I am not playing, Tony, I am serious. Be quick*."

Roger took his gun out of his pocket, held the handle of the door with the fingers of his left hand, turned again – and thrust the door open. The bright light dazzled him, but he saw the woman swing round, and saw the gun in her hand.

“Look out!” Sloan shouted.

Roger swayed to one side as the woman fired, and as his vision cleared. It was Mrs Liddel, in a dressing-gown, tall, regal, and lovely as Francesca; or she would have been lovely, but for the distorted twist of her face, the venom in her eyes. The shot roared out, and the bullet thudded into the wall.

Anthony Liddel, behind her now, near a bed, jumped forward and clutched at her arm. She kicked at him, but he didn’t let go. Roger moved, stretched up and gripped her wrist. The gun fell, but didn’t go off. Liddel let his mother go, and she turned on Roger like a wild cat, clawing at his face, kicking, glaring.

26

THE DOCUMENTS

Sloan took the frenzied woman round the waist, and pulled her away from Roger, still struggling. Sloan dragged her to a chair and pulled her into it, then held her shoulders tightly. She was gasping for breath, her face was still distorted, her eyes glittered as if they were the eyes of a fiend. She made a rumbling noise in her throat; gibberish.

Tony Liddel stood by the bed, pale-faced, in his eyes a haunted look. He sat down, heavily.

Roger shrugged his coat into position. The woman had scratched his right cheek; he felt it smarting, and dabbed at it with his handkerchief. It was bleeding a little. He didn't speak. The woman went on mouthing gibberish, but it was on a lower note. Roger took handcuffs from his pocket, fastened one handcuff round her wrist and the other round the wooden arm of the chair. They clicked. He drew back, and she sat there, glaring at him.

Then a bell rang, downstairs.

Sloan gulped. "Who's that?"

"Tell Burnaby to find out," Roger said.

Sloan nodded, and went off, leaving the door wide open. Tony Liddel sat up, wearily, the shadows still in his eyes.

Roger said: "Bad time, Tony."

"Bad!" the man echoed. He groped for cigarettes, with trembling fingers. Roger flicked his lighter and went across with it. The cigarette shook so much that the end put the lighter out. Roger flicked again.

Tony drew in the smoke. "Thanks."

The woman was staring at them, but making no sound.

"When did you know for certain that it was your mother?" Roger asked.

"Not until—ten minutes ago. When she came here."

"Sure?"

"Yes, of course," muttered Anthony Liddel. "I'd been afraid—we were all afraid—" He broke off.

"Sure you didn't find out some time ago, and try to kill her, because of it?"

"I didn't try to kill her!"

"Why did you run away?"

Liddel said: "I thought it might help my father, bring suspicion on me. That's why I lied about not going to see my mother, and I made Maisie promise not to tell. I wanted to fool you. Call me a hero!" He gave a little nervous laugh. "You see, I knew—"

He broke off.

Roger said evenly: "You knew that your mother photographed documents of great importance which your father brought home, and sold or gave the

photostats away, didn't you?

Liddel muttered: "Yes—yes. I was a long time getting round to it, but—"

He broke off.

Roger heard Sloan coming back, and voices downstairs; they seemed a long way off. "Hallo, Bill. Know who it is?" Roger asked.

"Maloney and Francesca, I think."

"Let them come up," Roger said. "Watch them, though." He didn't think there would be any further need to watch the others, but couldn't take a chance.

Sloan went to the landing and shouted down. The shout wasn't needed, for Maloney was talking, telling Burnaby he could do what he liked with his gun, they were going upstairs. Maloney actually ran up.

He came in first; Francesca wasn't far behind him. They saw Mrs Liddel, handcuffed, and Francesca stopped; then her gaze swept round the room. Slowly, she went forward, towards her mother. As she drew within reach, Mrs Liddel struck at her with her free hand.

"I shouldn't go near," Roger said. "She isn't safe."

"What—has happened?" Francesca's voice was barely audible, and Maloney stood dumb.

"We know what it's all about, now," said Roger. "We know who killed Lancelot Hay, and that your father was prepared to take the blame for it, because he didn't know the whole truth. You suspected that truth."

Francesca said wearily, but evasively: "How can you be sure it was mother?"

"Oh, she did it," Tony said. "She told me she did it. Boasted of it. She asked father to buy the arsenic for her, pretending it was for a weed killer. She'd known Lancelot was blackmailing father, and relished it. The whole damned business was so foul. She'd been selling State secrets for years, photographing all the papers father brought home to work on. That wonderful hobby of hers! She only needed a few minutes for each job, then passed them on to Lancelot."

Francesca closed her eyes; her mother glared at Liddel like a wild thing.

"Lancelot blackmailed father about the illegitimate child, too – playing them off against each other. Then father retired, there were no more documents, and Lancelot started to blackmail mother – about her spying.

"So she decided to kill him – and had the hellish idea of framing father for it. She knew Lancelot was blackmailing father, guessed where he was going that night, and told Lancelot she had to see him before dinner. They had drinks, and she put arsenic in Lancelot's.

"Of course, father knew she'd killed Lancelot, knew she knew about the other child, and – being father! – was prepared to hang to save her. He'd call it an act of atonement. Lancelot had been blackmailing him for years, of course – but I can't guess what reason he thought mother had for killing Lancelot."

"Can you?" Roger asked Francesca.

She shook her head.

Tony went on: “She thought there’d be no more trouble when Lancelot was dead, but Smith put pressure on her to get those last documents. He threatened her with exposure, and she tried desperately, even tonight. She was terrified by the man, he had her where he wanted her. Smith was dead. I think that finally turned her mind.”

Maloney turned to Roger.

“Call me a fool, West,” he said, “but I knew a bit about this. Frankie told me, and I wanted to help. No more harm could be done with State papers, as her father had resigned, and—no one could be sure. They just had to be sure.”

“That’s right,” Liddel said heavily. “We didn’t want to believe it. We thought the obvious thing might be true, that she hated father because of his other son. She played that string. Father believed that was why she did it, and wouldn’t say a word to help himself, if it meant turning suspicion on her. He called it making amends for that one slip – that other son.”

“She knew all about that,” Francesca said. “It must have turned her mind.”

Her mother had drooped, now, into a stupor, and her eyes were half closed.

Roger asked: “Why did she kill Lancelot?”

“He began to blackmail her, as I told you, after father retired and there were no more documents. He was only a go-between, and didn’t get much out of the job. Mother let it all out, before you came. She’d started years ago, working with the family friend – Al Maloney. He was an agent for another power. She had some dealings with a man named Smith, a big shot agent in England, too. Have you caught up with Smith?” He looked at Roger.

“Yes,” said Roger, “we’ve found Smith. What we don’t know yet is who told you about that cottage near Stamford, and who sent those anonymous letters to the Yard.”

Liddel said: “Well, I can answer that one. Maisie did.”

“*What*?” cried Roger.

“Poor, dumb, timid Maisie. She hated mother, because she was once engaged to a chauffeur here, who stole a few pounds. The chauffeur went to prison, and died while there. Maisie blamed mother for his death. She guessed mother had killed Lancelot, and sent those letters – she hadn’t the courage to name anyone. It all misfired. Then—”

“But the message about the cottage? How did she know that?”

“She was in Smith’s pay. She knew Kane. She was a good agent, up to a point, but her hatred of mother made her send those anonymous letters. When Maisie saw how it was going she tried to poison mother.”

“How do you know?” Roger was abrupt.

“Oh, she’s told me,” young Liddel said. “She always had a soft spot for me. She’s—devoted. She let me hide here, and I was waiting for a chance to get the whole truth, just to save my father.

“I thought I was on the way tonight. It’s a special brand of hell to have to

see your own mother as an inhuman devil, but I'd come round to it. Everything Frankie and I had feared was true. Frankie went to the States, to find the older Maloney, to find out if there was more in it than the other son. She'd learned a little, and—well, we were desperate, even before Lancelot was killed."

"What made you desperate so early?"

"It started when Kane put the squeeze on us. Before she left for the States, Frankie found some photostats in mother's room and a letter to Maloney. She knew then what mother had done, but didn't know why. Was she being blackmailed, or—" Liddel broke off. "We just had to find out if it had happened before.

"Frankie didn't find the real Maloney. He'd been recalled to England, that's about all we knew. He telephoned my mother and said he was in some trouble."

"I see," said Roger slowly. "He was in trouble, all right, his employers sentenced him to death. Liddel, can you tell me what documents Kane wanted?"

Liddel didn't answer.

Francesca said: "Yes. The photographs I saw in mother's room. They were stolen, and Kane thought one of us had taken them. Those damned photographs! We lied because of them, we wanted to save father, but didn't want to let anyone know about mother and the documents. I nearly failed—when I blurted out something about the documents Kane wanted from Tony, but I had to cover up, somehow."

Maloney drew her close to him. "All I knew, honey, was that Kane was giving you hell. I could have killed him, and came close to doing it. West thought I was in the plot, I guess. Who can blame him?"

"Have you the photostats?" Roger asked Francesca.

"No," she said.

"No," echoed Liddel.

"There's one angle we haven't tried yet," Roger said to Sloan.

"I can guess which. Roger, what was that anonymous letter you talked about?"

Roger laughed.

"A note to Mrs Liddel, telling her that her son was likely to visit her. I wanted her worked up about that. Forget it, and tell me why Mrs Liddel ever got into it, and why she hated her husband so much."

"Don't ask me," said Sloan.

James Liddel was in bed, but the light was on in his cell, and he was reading a heavy-looking book; as Roger drew near, he saw that it was Gibbon's *Decline and Fall.* Liddel smiled and put the book on the small chair at the bedside. He looked old, but his calmness remained, and he waved to the foot of the bed.

"Please sit down, Mr West."

"Thanks."

"You must find your duties onerous, if they keep you busy so late as this."

"They are," said Roger mildly. "Mr Liddel, what did you do with the photographs of the last set of documents which your wife obtained?"

The effect of the question was as great as the effect of the name Maloney had been. Liddel's composure was wiped away as if it had never existed. In that swift second he seemed to become an older man, with all his defences crumbling. It happened that way so often: there was one weak spot, and as soon as it was found, resistance broke.

Roger said quietly: "You see, we know that Mrs Liddel killed your nephew, and that you realised it. We know that you preferred to suffer for it, because of a sense of loyalty – a very great sense of loyalty – and everyone must admire you for it. We know that she discovered about your other son with the help of a private inquiry agent, and made you think that explained her actions. We know that she was dealing with enemy agents for years. The one thing we don't know is what happened to these photographed documents which are missing."

Liddel sat looking at him, despairing.

"Where are they?" Roger insisted.

Liddel said: "How did you find out all this?"

"It came out step by step, as it always does."

"My wife?"

"Is now at Scotland Yard. The more you tell us now, the less her ordeal will be."

Liddel said hesitantly: "I have tried to save her because I blamed myself for causing her to—become a traitor. I discovered, before I retired, that she was photographing papers – that was why I retired when I did. Nothing could be done about the past, and there was no danger of losing further secrets, but one set of photographs never left my house. I saw her in my study with her camera, and later found the developed photographs. They dealt with European Union plans in the event of war. I destroyed them before they could be passed on. The harm was done with the others, only these really mattered. I thought that all I needed to do was to hold my peace, and perhaps help to restore hers. I knew she was giving them to Lancelot, guessed she killed him because he started to blackmail her."

"And if you'd been hanged, she would have gone unpunished."

"Her misery and the hatred she felt was punishment," Liddel said. "She could do no more harm to the nation, and I was not prepared to make my own escape by bringing about her downfall. I am an old man, Mr West, and I have served some useful purpose. Only I can measure my own success and failure, and for my failure I was prepared to go through with this. I wish that had been possible, I do not want my wife to suffer more. But it is inevitable, now. Inevitable." He whispered the word. "Do the others know?"

"Yes," Roger told him gently. "And they did everything they could to help you."

"There is always light as well as darkness," Liddel said.

"There's one ray of light two people badly need," said Roger, after a pause. He framed his words carefully. "Francesca and the man she wants to marry must have it. You haven't met the man. I think you'd like him."

Liddel said: "When my mind is clearer I can think about that, but not now. Francesca—"

"You must think of it now. You'd like him, I think. He was orphaned, many years ago, and has lived in America most of his life."

"I don't understand you," Liddel said.

"Do you know your natural son? His name, where he lives, anything about him?' "Surely you know him, too," said Liddel in surprise.

"You mentioned him to me. He is Louis Kane."

In the next few days the Harrings were caught; they would serve long sentences. MI5 was already after the spy ring and uncovering very big stuff. They knew that Lancelot Hay had paid most of the money he'd received to a foreign power's embassy in London; the same power's New York embassy had paid Al Maloney senior, in dollars.

There was one other discovery pieced together from Mrs Liddel's incoherent ramblings, which placed the final piece into the jigsaw.

Mrs Liddel had had an *affaire* with Al Maloney years before. Maloney had started to threaten to tell Liddel – and said he would keep quiet if she gave him a photostat of a document. From then on, Maloney had been able to force her to do whatever he'd wanted, she had been terrified of her husband learning of the *affaire*.

Then she had discovered about her husband's natural son.

She'd let herself be drawn deeply into spying because of her *affaire* before marriage; and he'd been unfaithful after their marriage.

She had begun to hate Liddel.

And she had gone mad.

"Daddy!" called Scoopy, at the top of his voice. "Daddy! There's a gentleman."

"And a *lady*," piped Richard.

They came tearing into the kitchen from the back garden, Scoopy hatless and untidy, Richard running and tousled, but somehow neat, cheeks glowing, eyes eager.

"A nice lady," Richard said. "Very pretty."

"The man's an American," announced Scoopy, "I heard him talking to the lady."

The front doorbell rang.

Roger said: "Run upstairs and tell Mummy, will you?"

He had been putting some protectors in the heels of the children's shoes, had his coat off, and the iron foot and the hammer on a small table. He washed his hands quickly and put on his coat. Janet was already in the hall when he reached it – and obviously the children had told her the news, for she whispered: "It must be Maloney."

It was Francesca and Maloney.

"Looking for a guessing game?" Roger asked, leading the way to the front room.

Maloney chuckled.

"Have it your own way. The fact is, we got round to talking about you last night, and agreed it would be pleasant to see you again before we leave. We're going home," he added, and gripped Francesca's arm. "You won't be surprised at that."

"I've expected it," Roger said.

"You will stay for a cup of tea, won't you?" said Janet. "I'll get it." She hurried out of the room, and the others sat down.

Maloney was looking at his most attractive. Francesca, in a lightweight suit of grey-and-blue over check, was at her loveliest. There was no sign of the strain of the past few weeks, or of the trial. Her mother had been sent to Broadmoor, after being found insane. Her father had died a few days before the trial. Kane was serving a ten years' sentence for his part in the crimes; the police accepted his statement that Smith had given him the gun, and he had not been charged with murder.

"I'll say this for you," Maloney said, "you were a better detective than once I thought! Do I have to say I'm sorry?"

"You're more honest than I suspected," Roger grinned.

Francesca laughed.

"We're off on the *Queen Elizabeth* tonight," said Maloney, "and neither of us will be sorry. If you're interested, Tony is staying in England. He says it would seem like running away if he left right now. He's a very good chap."

"We've learned that," said Roger.

Outside the door, the boys were whispering.

"I'll tell you another thing," said Maloney. "I met one of your men a few days ago – Burnaby. Sergeant Burnaby now, he tells me, and in the Flying Squad. He approves of you, West."

"Burnaby's all right," said Roger. It was odd, but he hardly knew what to say, would have welcomed the boys had they come rushing in.

"Mr West." Francesca smiled up at him, a smile which most men would have given much to win. "I think it's time we really told you why we came. It is to say thank you. To tell you that we shall always feel proud to have known you, that we shall always remember you."

There was even less to say.

Janet approached, outside, and the tea things rattled on a tray.

"Open the door, Scoopy," she said, "and then you can just go in and say hallo, then go out into the garden and play again. Be good boys."

"Why, hello, folk!" cried Maloney, as they came in, suddenly coy and timid. "I've been wanting to meet you." He rumpled Scoopy's hair, which Janet had tidied, and pulled Richard's right ear gently. "Say, listen. Do you know what a cowboy is?"

"Oh, yes!" said Scoopy, timidity gone.

"Of course," said Richard, loftily.

“Fine! I’m a cowboy. Yes, a real one. And if you go out to the car and open the back door, you’ll find two parcels. Go and get them, open them up, and see if the clothes fit.”

Two astounded children gazed at him.

“Cowboy clothes,” breathed Scoopy.

“*Real* cowboy?” sighed Richard ecstatically.

Sure.

There was a moment of utter silence before the boys turned and raced each other to the door.

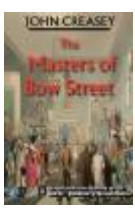
Series Information

Published or to be published by
House of Stratus

Dates given are those of first publication
Alternative titles in brackets

'The Baron' (47 titles) (writing as Anthony Morton)
'Department 'Z'' (28 titles)
'Dr. Palfrey Novels' (34 titles)
'Gideon of Scotland Yard' (22 titles)
'Inspector West' (43 titles)
'Sexton Blake' (5 titles)
'The Toff' (59 titles)

along with:



The Masters of Bow Street
This epic novel embraces the story of the Bow Street Runners and the Marine Police, forerunners of the modern police force, who were founded by novelist Henry Fielding in 1748. They were the earliest detective force operating from the courts to enforce the decisions of magistrates. John Creasey's account also gives a fascinating insight into family life of the time and the struggle between crime and justice, and ends with the establishment of the Metropolitan Police after the passing of Peel's Act in 1829.

'The Baron' Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Meet the Baron *(The Man in the Blue Mask) (1937)*
2. The Baron Returns *(The Return of the Blue Mask) (1937)*

3. The Baron Again *(Salute Blue Mask) (1938)*
4. The Baron at Bay *(Blue Mask at Bay) (1938)*
5. Alias the Baron *(Alias Blue Mask) (1939)*
6. The Baron at Large *(Challenge Blue Mask!) (1939)*
7. Versus the Baron *(Blue Mask Strikes Again) (1940)*
8. Call for the Baron *(Blue Mask Victorious) (1940)*
9. The Baron Comes Back *(1943)*
10. A Case for the Baron *(1945)*
11. Reward for the Baron *(1945)*
12. Career for the Baron *(1946)*
13. Blood Diamond *(The Baron and the Beggar) (1947)*
14. Blame the Baron *(1948)*
15. A Rope for the Baron *(1948)*
16. Books for the Baron *(1949)*
17. Cry for the Baron *(1950)*
18. Trap the Baron *(1950)*
19. Attack the Baron *(1951)*
20. Shadow the Baron *(1951)*
21. Warn the Baron *(1952)*
22. The Baron Goes East *(1953)*
23. The Baron in France *(1953)*
24. Danger for the Baron *(1953)*
25. The Baron Goes Fast *(1954)*
26. Nest-Egg for the Baron *(Deaf, Dumb and Blonde) (1954)*
27. Help from the Baron *(1955)*
28. Hide the Baron *(1956)*
29. The Double Frame *(Frame the Baron) (1957)*
30. Blood Red *(Red Eye for the Baron) (1958)*
31. If Anything Happens to Hester *(Black for the Baron) (1959)*
32. Salute for the Baron *(1960)*
33. The Baron Branches Out *(A Branch for the Baron) (1961)*
34. The Baron and the Stolen Legacy *(Bad for the Baron) (1962)*
35. A Sword for the Baron *(The Baron and the Mogul Swords) (1963)*
36. The Baron on Board *(The Mask of Sumi) (1964)*
37. The Baron and the Chinese Puzzle *(1964)*
38. Sport for the Baron *(1966)*
39. Affair for the Baron *(1967)*
40. The Baron and the Missing Old Masters *(1968)*
41. The Baron and the Unfinished Portrait *(1969)*
42. Last Laugh for the Baron *(1970)*
43. The Baron Goes A-Buying *(1971)*
44. The Baron and the Arrogant Artist *(1972)*
45. Burgle the Baron *(1973)*
46. The Baron - King Maker *(1975)*
47. Love for the Baron *(1979)*

'Department Z' Novels

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. The Death Miser *(1932)*
2. Redhead *(1934)*
3. First Came a Murder *(1934)*
4. Death Round the Corner *(1935)*
5. The Mark of the Crescent *(1935)*
6. Thunder in Europe *(1936)*
7. The Terror Trap *(1936)*
8. Carriers of Death *(1937)*
9. Days of Danger *(1937)*
10. Death Stands By *(1938)*
11. Menace! *(1938)*
12. Murder Must Wait *(1939)*
13. Panic! *(1939)*
14. Death by Night *(1940)*
15. The Island of Peril *(1940)*
16. Sabotage *(1941)*
17. Go Away Death *(1941)*
18. The Day of Disaster *(1942)*
19. Prepare for Action *(1942)*
20. No Darker Crime *(1943)*
21. Dark Peril *(1944)*
22. The Peril Ahead *(1946)*
23. The League of Dark Men *(1947)*
24. The Department of Death *(1949)*
25. The Enemy Within *(1950)*
26. Dead or Alive *(1951)*
27. A Kind of Prisoner *(1954)*
28. The Black Spiders *(1957)*

Doctor Palfrey Novels

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Traitor's Doom *(1942)*
2. The Legion of the Lost *(1943)*
3. The Valley of Fear *(The Perilous Country) (1943)*
4. Dangerous Quest *(1944)*
5. Death in the Rising Sun *(1945)*

6. The Hounds of Vengeance *(1945)*
7. Shadow of Doom *(1946)*
8. The House of the Bears *(1946)*
9. Dark Harvest *(1947)*
10. The Wings of Peace *(1948)*
11. The Sons of Satan *(1948)*
12. The Dawn of Darkness *(1949)*
13. The League of Light *(1949)*
14. The Man Who Shook the World *(1950)*
15. The Prophet of Fire *(1951)*
16. The Children of Hate *(The Killers of Innocence; The Children of Despair) (1952)*
17. The Touch of Death *(1954)*
18. The Mists of Fear *(1955)*
19. The Flood *(1956)*
20. The Plague of Silence *(1958)*
21. Dry Spell *(The Drought) (1959)*
22. The Terror *(1962)*
23. The Depths *(1963)*
24. The Sleep *(1964)*
25. The Inferno *(1965)*
26. The Famine *(1967)*
27. The Blight *(1968)*
28. The Oasis *(1970)*
29. The Smog *(1970)*
30. The Unbegotten *(1971)*
31. The Insulators *(1972)*
32. The Voiceless Ones *(1973)*
33. The Thunder-Maker *(1976)*
34. The Whirlwind *(1979)*

Gideon Series

(Writing as JJ Marric)

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Gideon's Day *(Gideon of Scotland Yard) (1955)*
2. Seven Days to Death *(Gideon's Week) (1956)*
3. Gideon's Night *(1957)*
4. A Backwards Jump *(Gideon's Month) (1958)*
5. Thugs and Economies *(Gideon's Staff) (1959)*
6. Gideon Combats Influence *(Gideon's Risk) (1960)*
7. Gideon's Fire *(1961)*

8. A Conference for Assassins *(Gideon's March) (1962)*
9. Travelling Crimes *(Gideon's Ride) (1963)*
10. An Uncivilised Election *(Gideon's Vote) (1964)*
11. Criminal Imports *(Gideon's Lot) (1965)*
12. To Nail a Serial Killer *(Gideon's Badge) (1966)*
13. From Murder to a Cathedral *(Gideon's Wrath) (1967)*
14. Gideon's River *(1968)*
15. Darkness and Confusion *(Gideon's Power) (1969)*
16. Sport, Heat & Scotland Yard *(Gideon's Sport) (1970)*
17. Gideon's Art *(1971)*
18. No Relaxation at Scotland Yard *(Gideon's Men) (1972)*
19. Impartiality Against the Mob *(Gideon's Press) (1973)*
20. Not Hidden by the Fog *(Gideon's Fog) (1975)*
21. Good and Justice *(Gideon's Drive) (1976)*
22. Vigilantes & Biscuits *(Gideon's Force) (1978)*

Inspector West Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Inspector West Takes Charge *(1942)*
2. Go Away to Murder *(Inspector West Leaves Town) (1943)*
3. An Apostle of Gloom *(Inspector West At Home) (1944)*
4. Inspector West Regrets *(1945)*
5. Holiday for Inspector West *(1946)*
6. Battle for Inspector West *(1948)*
7. The Case Against Paul Raeburn *(Triumph for Inspector West) (1948)*
8. Inspector West Kicks Off *(Sport for Inspector West) (1949)*
9. Inspector West Alone *(1950)*
10. Inspector West Cries Wolf *(The Creepers) (1950)*
11. The Figure in the Dusk *(A Case for Inspector West) (1951)*
12. The Dissemblers *(Puzzle for Inspector West) (1951)*
13. The Case of the Acid Throwers *(The Blind Spot; Inspector West at Bay) (1952)*
14. Give a Man a Gun *(A Gun for Inspector West) (1953)*
15. Send Inspector West *(1953)*
16. So Young, So Cold, So Fair *(A Beauty for Inspector West; The Beauty Queen Killer) (1954)*
17. Murder Makes Haste *(Inspector West Makes Haste; The Gelignite Gang; Night of the Watchman) (1955)*
18. Murder: One, Two, Three *(Two for Inspector West) (1955)*
19. Death of a Postman *(Parcels for Inspector West) (1956)*
20. Death of an Assassin *(A Prince for Inspector West) (1956)*
21. Hit and Run *(Accident for Inspector West) (1957)*

22. The Trouble at Saxby's *(Find Inspector West; Doorway to Death) (1957)*
23. Murder, London - New York *(1958)*
24. Strike for Death *(The Killing Strike) (1958)*
25. Death of a Racehorse *(1959)*
26. The Case of the Innocent Victims *(1959)*
27. Murder on the Line *(1960)*
28. Death in Cold Print *(1961)*
29. The Scene of the Crime *(1961)*
30. Policeman's Dread *(1962)*
31. Hang the Little Man *(1963)*
32. Look Three Ways at Murder *(1964)*
33. Murder, London - Australia *(1965)*
34. Murder, London - South Africa *(1966)*
35. The Executioners *(1967)*
36. So Young to Burn *(1968)*
37. Murder, London - Miami *(1969)*
38. A Part for a Policeman *(1970)*
39. Alibi for Inspector West *(1971)*
40. A Splinter of Glass *(1972)*
41. The Theft of Magna Carta *(1973)*
42. The Extortioners *(1974)*
43. A Sharp Rise in Crime *(1978)*

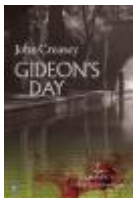
'The Toff' Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Introducing the Toff *(It's the Toff!) (1938)*
2. The Toff Goes On *(1939)*
3. The Toff Steps Out *(1939)*
4. Here Comes the Toff *(1940)*
5. The Toff Breaks In *(1940)*
6. Salute the Toff *(1941)*
7. The Toff Proceeds *(1941)*
8. The Toff Goes to Market *(1942)*
9. The Toff Is Back *(1942)*
10. The Toff on the Trail *(short stories) (1942)*
11. The Toff among the Millions *(1943)*
12. Accuse the Toff *(1943)*
13. The Toff and the Deadly Priest *(The Toff and the Curate) (1944)*
14. The Toff and the Great Illusion *(1944)*
15. Feathers for the Toff *(1945)*
16. The Toff and the Lady *(1946)*

17. Poison for the Toff *(The Toff on Ice) (1946)*
18. Hammer the Toff *(1947)*
19. The Toff in Town *(1948)*
20. The Toff Takes Shares *(1948)*
21. The Toff and Old Harry *(1949)*
22. The Toff on Board *(1949)*
23. Fool the Toff *(1950)*
24. Kill the Toff *(1950)*
25. A Knife for the Toff *(1951)*
26. A Mask for the Toff *(The Toff Goes Gay) (1951)*
27. Hunt the Toff *(1952)*
28. Call the Toff *(1953)*
29. The Toff Down Under *(Break the Toff) (1953)*
30. Murder Out of the Past *(short stories) (1953)*
31. The Toff at Camp *(The Toff at Butlins) (1954)*
32. The Toff at the Fair *(1954)*
33. A Six for the Toff *(A Score for the Toff) (1955)*
34. The Toff and the Deep Blue Sea *(1955)*
35. Kiss the Toff *(Make-Up for the Toff) (1956)*
36. The Toff in New York *(1956)*
37. Model for the Toff *(1957)*
38. The Toff on Fire *(1957)*
39. The Toff and the Stolen Tresses *(1958)*
40. Terror for the Toff *(The Toff on the Farm) (1958)*
41. Double for the Toff *(1959)*
42. The Toff and the Runaway Bride *(1959)*
43. A Rocket for the Toff *(1960)*
44. The Toff and the Kidnapped *(The Kidnapped Child) (1960)*
45. Follow the Toff *(1961)*
46. The Toff and the Toughs *(The Toff and the Teds) (1961)*
47. A Doll for the Toff *(1963)*
48. Leave It to the Toff *(1963)*
49. The Toff and the Spider *(1965)*
50. The Toff in Wax *(1966)*
51. A Bundle for the Toff *(1967)*
52. Stars for the Toff *(1968)*
53. The Toff and the Golden Boy *(1969)*
54. The Toff and the Fallen Angels *(1970)*
55. Vote for the Toff *(1971)*
56. The Toff and the Trip-Trip-Triplets *(1972)*
57. The Toff and the Terrified Taxman *(1973)*
58. The Toff and the Sleepy Cowboy *(1975)*
59. The Toff and the Crooked Copper *(1977)*

Select Synopses

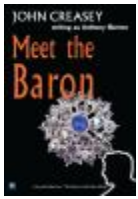


Gideon's Day
Gideon's day is a busy one. He balances family commitments with solving a series of seemingly unrelated crimes from which a plot nonetheless evolves and a mystery is solved. One of the most senior officers within Scotland Yard, George Gideon's crime solving abilities are in the finest traditions of London's world famous police headquarters. His analytical brain and sense of fairness is respected by colleagues and villains alike.

Gideon's Night
On this particular night Commander George Gideon has to deal with a couple of psychopaths who trail pain and blood in their wake. One targets infants, and the other young women on London's foggy streets. There's also an explosive gang war in the offing, and one way or another all of these cases are coming to their breathtaking conclusions at the same time. Can Scotland Yard's finest cope with such a nightmarish scenario, with what would ordinarily be months of time consuming police work crammed into just one night?

Gideon's Fire
Commander George Gideon of Scotland Yard has to deal successively with news of a mass murderer, a depraved maniac, and the deaths of a family in an arson attack on an old building south of the river. This leaves little time for the crisis developing at home . . .

Meet the Baron
John Mannering (*The Baron*) makes

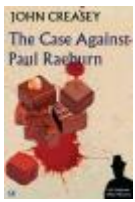


his first appearance in this volume. Lord Fauntley cannot help showing off both his daughter and the security under which his precious jewels are kept. Mannering finds himself attracted to both .... Money is tight and so he plans a burglary, but this fails and unexpected consequnces result. The relationship with Lorna Fauntley flourishes, and a series of high profile thefts and adventures ensure Mannering's future, so he believes, until Lorna equates him with *The Baron*. One of the many further twists in this award winning novel occurs when the police appear to seek Mannering's help, only to have everything turned upside down as the plot develops . . .

Shadow The Baron
John Mannering ('*The Baron*') is called in by Scorland Yard's Superintendent Bristow to help catch the mysterious jewel thief '*The Shadow*'. No one know the thief's identity, but he has managed to pull off many high profile robberies. However, as Mannering proceeds to track down the target, he finds the pursuer becomes the pursued . . . ..

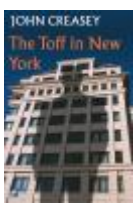
The House of the Bears
Standing alone in the bleak Yorkshire Moors is Sir Rufus Marne's *'House of the Bears'*. Dr. Palfrey is asked to journey there to examine an invalid - whom he finds has disappeared. Moreover, Marne's daughter lies terribly injured after a fall from the minstrel's gallery, which Dr. Palfrey discovers was no accident. He sets out to look into both matters, but the discoveries he makes are truly fantastic. A deserted mine, powerful explosive and a submarine all feature in this powerful mystery. The results are even capable of surprising him ...

Inspector West Takes Charge
Extortion is the name of the game, as one victim after another is ruthlessly targeted. Chief Inspector Roger West must now solve the problem, along with a tangle of murders - but the case becomes more frightening as every minute passes.



The Case Against Paul Raeburn
Chief Inspector Roger West has been watching and waiting for over two years - he is determined to catch Paul Raeburn out. The millionaire racketeer may have made a mistake, following the killing of a small time crook. Can the ace detective triumph over the evil Raeburn in what are very difficult circumstances? This cannot be assumed as not eveything, it would seem, is as simple as it first appears .....

Introducing The Toff
The Toff is the Hon. Richard Rollison; the ultimate sleuth who revels in solving crimes. Whilst returning home across the Essex countryside from a day's cricket at his father's Norfolk home, he happens upon an accident that sets him on a new trail. This involves murder, suspense and thrilling action as The Toff applies his mind with its usual precision and thoroughness.



The Toff in New York
'Say, Miss Hall, I hope that brother of yours hasn't run into any trouble.' But Will Hall had been kidnapped and the Honourable Richard Rollison, known by many by the apt if absurd soubriquet of the *'Toff'* is soon on the scene, but not before a murdered man had fallen into Valerie Hallís arms. There's lots of action in 'millionaire surroundings', with a rich private eye

and the NYPD all on the case, whilst the Toff tracks Dutch Himmy, surely the worst man in New York . . . ..

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